

GRIPPER

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. SKY - NIGHT

High above the earth a star-lit night illuminates mountain peaks that thrust through low-lying clouds.

Seemingly serene. But beneath those clouds there is a shimmering of light, a heated glow.

Descending closer, the clouds transform into an hallucinatory maelstrom of pungent smoke and sparks.

Descending faster now, breaking through the swirling, burning chaos and directly into --

EXT. FIRESTORM - NIGHT

Hell on earth.

An apocalyptic firestorm rampages through a forest of already dead and dying trees, devouring at will.

An inflamed deer struggles to stand then collapses in a fiery heap.

A smoking snake slithers, sizzling across scorched earth. A boot pounds past it.

Volunteer firefighters KRISTA and BOBBY, (20's) scramble in their fire suits.

A hundred feet behind them THREE FIREFIGHTERS are consumed by a wall of fire.

Desperate, they search for an escape route, the flames now licking at their heels.

Through the flames Krista spies a massive, unscathed 1000 YEAR-OLD TREE rearing skyward. She pulls the panicking Bobby towards it and they collapse at its base.

Besides them, it is the only living thing.

The flames have now encircled them.

Krista wrenches a fire tent from her bag but its ripped from her hand by the firestorm wind and into the flames.

KRISTA

Fuck!

She rips off her helmet and throws it to the flames. Eyes wild, defiant. She looks about knowing this is it.

KRISTA (CONT'D)

You bring the S'mores Bobby?

BOBBY

Better over coals 'less you want
'em crispy burned.

He huddles into her.

BOBBY (CONT'D)

Krista, I don't wanna burn!

Krista grabs his arm.

KRISTA

You ain't gonna burn.

BOBBY

But we're gonna die!

The flames encroach.

Krista stands and unsnaps the fire axe from her belt.

Bobby looks up. Krista doesn't have to explain it. Bobby takes off his helmet and a crazed grin hangs on his face.

BOBBY (CONT'D)

You always been there for me.

He chokes a SOB and turns his head away.

KRISTA

Close your eyes.

BOBBY

Naw, this last light, it's all
kinda beautiful...

Curtains of flame, wind-whipped and multi-hued dance
before his eyes, then --

The axe cleaves his skull.

He drops to the earth, twitches once, lies still.

Krista wrenches the axe free then swings the blade into
the Tree, the sharp pike sticking out.

She grips the tree trunk, grits her teeth.

KRISTA

Oh, sweet mother...

The flames are at her. She emits a PRIMAL GROWL as her
hair alights -- then drives her forehead into the pike.

BLACKOUT

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

The firestorm has dissipated, the earth littered with smoldering stumps.

Through the smoky ruins a group of people emerge.

Gena (25), an intense beauty streaked in ash and sweat, leads the group towards the Tree. Trailing her is TOR (25), a long-haired, eco-hippy and TWO FIREFIGHTERS.

They stop at the sight of the blackened bodies.

The blackened husk of Krista impaled on the axe, the handle burned away. Below her, Bobby's charred remains.

FIREFIGHTER 1

Aw, fuck.

Tor bends over and vomits.

Gena moves up and coolly inspects Krista's remains. But she's even more fascinated by the Tree and looks up...

GENA'S POV

It towers 75 meters above her. The green limbs and huge crown still intact.

She lays her hands on the Tree, then, oddly, her cheek.

Tor finishes wiping his face, looks at the destruction surrounding them, up at the Tree.

TOR

Some kinda miracle. Everything else incinerated.

And he's right, the fire burn stopped a foot from the trunk, just close enough to devour Krista and Bobby.

Gena circumnavigates the tree, studying the ground. SHE crouches and takes up a sample of earth from its base, rubs it between her fingers. Sniffs it.

FIREFIGHTER 1

(to Gena)

Excuse me, we have some clean-up to do here.

GENA

Right. I'm sorry.

Gena steps back as the Firefighters start peeling Krista's remains off the Tree and dropping them in a body bag. Piece by piece.

Gena leads Tor away.

GENA (CONT'D)

Listen, I want biotics. Root, bark

--

TOR

-- needles, core samples. A piece
of everything. I know.

He backs off to the Tree, slinging his backpack off.

Gena looks up the Tree again, the radiant green crown
towering in the smoldering sky.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - AERIAL - DAY

A sprawling campus perched on a mountain overlooks a
metropolis in one direction, a wilderness in the other.

INT. UNIVERSITY - LECTURE HALL - DAY

Gena stands at a lectern. The hall is deserted except for
four bodies up front.

Darius(35), a darkly handsome and imposing figure
scrutinizes her intensely, and Dr. MAYNARD(50), a dough-
faced man in a lab jacket.

Behind them sit a gaunt-faced man, FRANZEN, and a deep-
browed woman, KEHLER,(40's), both attired in drab suits.

An ECU of a small beetle built like a micro battle tank
fills the screen behind Gena.

GENA

All evidence points to the pine
beetle as the chief enabler of the
firestorms. When beetle
infestation kills a tree the
needles drop to the ground. That's
fuel for fire. When the dead tree
eventually drops, it's more fuel.

(beat)

Now, after a generation of mild
winters due to climate change --

INT. UNIVERSITY - WESTFOR LAB - SAME

Tor carries a buzzing clear plastic container of PINE
BEETLES into a Plexiglas room in the middle of the lab.

GENA (V.O.)

-- the pine beetle has been able
to reproduce exponentially,
spreading faster than even the
most pessimistic projections.

Tor empties them into a glass terrarium atop a workbench.

GENA (V.O.)

New evidence shows that after
obliterating pine forests in the
western U.S. and Canada --

RINJI (25), a dyed-blond Japanese student, enters with a
container of WASPS and inserts them into the terrarium.

GENA (V.O.)

-- they're migrating east towards
the boreal forests that spread
from the Rockies to the Atlantic.

Then TOR spills a box filled with LARGE-JAWED ANTS.

INT. UNIVERSITY - LECTURE HALL - SAME

Darius turns back to Franzen and Kehler.

DARIUS

These developments pose a serious
threat to not only the ecological
balance of the continent, but of
the world.

GENA

And Westfor's forestry business.

Darius clears his throat.

DARIUS

The destruction of millions of
more hectares would cause radical
loss of oxygen production, weaken
bio-diversity, and create wide-
spread soil erosion and flooding.
The economic repercussions of such
a disaster are projected to be in
the hundreds of billions of
dollars short-term.

GENA

And of course there's the question
about major loss of life. Animal.
Vegetable.

(beat)

People?

Darius turns to her with a "what the fuck" look.

Gena ignores it and steps to the edge of the stage.

GENA (CONT'D)

Excuse me, I didn't get from what
Westfor division you two are from.

Franzen raises his brows.

FRANZEN

Applied Environmental Biotics.

GENA

OK.
 (turns to Kehler)
 And you?

KEHLER

Business and Legal Affairs.

GENA

So this dog and pony show is for you.

DR. MAYNARD

Gena, please, this is our chance to justify what the team has accomplished.

KEHLER

And get a budget injection so your research can continue.

DARIUS

Gena? Let's move on to the good news.

GENA

Of course, Darius. The good news.

(beat)

We've tried pesticides, organic and synthetic, even sonic waves. All ineffective. Until now.

New images appear on screen - MYCELIUM - strands of organic material in myriad colors and textures.

GENA (O.C.) (CONT'D)

Mycelium, the subterranean part of fungus and the largest organism ever to inhabit the planet --

TIME LAPSE as the Mycelium spreads and morphs.

GENA (O.C.) (CONT'D)

-- sometimes spreading over hundreds of hectares. Binding soils, it's extremely tenacious, and yields nutrients to the fungus above.

Gena steps forward.

GENA (CONT'D)

We've developed a strain of cordyceps fungus that succeeds at two critical needs. One, it spreads nutrient-rich mycelium through depleted soil aiding in forest regeneration, and two, when mature, the cordyceps fungus emerges to hunt down, infest, and kill the pine beetle.

Kehler looks to Franzen.

KEHLER

Wow.

GENA

Trial starts in ten.

She walks off stage.

Darius smiles to his audience then calls after her.

DARIUS

We'll catch up with you in the lab
in a moment.

GENA

(sotto)
Fuck you too.

INT. UNIVERSITY - HALLWAY - SAME

Gena SLAMS the door and leans back on it in the darkened hallway.

VERN (O.C.)

You OK?

She jumps.

VERN (30), a beefy security guard stands three feet away.

GENA

Do that again I'll kick your
fuckin' teeth in.

VERN

(drops his eyes)
Sorry Gena.

GENA

Kidding, Vern.

VERN

Oh...Everything OK?

She reaches up and places a hand on his cheek. He's startled by the intimate gesture.

GENA

Better be.

She drops her hand and moves off into the gloom.

INT. UNIVERSITY - BATHROOM STALL - DAY

Gena sits on the toilet looking down at a handful of colored pills.

Picks two red ones and dry swallows. Leans her head back and HUMS a lullaby.

INT. UNIVERSITY - WESTFOR LAB - DAY

Gena pushes through a door marked 'Westfor Resources Biotics Lab - Cascadia University School of Forest Ecology'

The large, white, sterile lab is chaotic with energy.

JULIAN (30), big-boned and boyish, SAL (25), earthy hippy chick and Claire (25), exotic with dread-locks, fiddle with lab instruments and video equipment.

SAL

What's taking them?

CLAIRE

She better not fuck up or we're toast.

JULIAN

Hey, there she is.

Gena cruises up, owning the place, head pivoting back and forth monitoring their readiness.

GENA

Good to go?

CLAIRE

Just about.

SAL

What'd they say?

GENA

Nothing's confirmed except that we're done if we don't make this work today.

Rinji leans in.

RINJI

Hey, the bank just rolled in.

Darius leads Dr. Maynard, Franzen and Kehler into the lab and directly to the Plexiglas and the buzzing terrarium.

SAL

(sotto)

Got more pests in here than we know what to do with.

RINJI

Ha!

Gena walks over and stands behind Darius and the others.

DARIUS

(to the suits)

The wasps and ants are our control species --

GENA

(interrupting)

We've genetically modified a neuroactive steroid synthesized from Gamma-aminobutyric acid.

KEHLER

Uh, translation please.

DARIUS

"Steroid" being the key word. It's the chief inhibitory neurotransmitter in mammals --

GENA

-- and now that we've been able to successfully apply it to the cordyceps fungus, it acts as an excitatory growth transmitter.

FRANZEN

Intriguing.

GENA

Voracious.

KEHLER

Really?

DARIUS

Really.

FRANZEN

Timeline for field trials?

GENA

So far the results have been somewhat indiscriminate.

DARIUS

As I was saying about our control species? They've been victims of some collateral damage.

GENA

But we've maintained a five percent asymptomatic carrier rate.

KEHLER

Excuse me? Asympto...?

FRANZEN
HIV carriers. Typhoid Mary.

GENA
Diseased, not dead.

DARIUS
A real-world situation needs
carriers to transmit the cordyceps
deep into the beetle colony. We
can't rely solely on industrial
spraying to kill them all.

KEHLER
An inside job, so to speak.

DR. MAYNARD
As many infested sites are
isolated we need to ensure that an
offensive tactic is maintained.

GENA
(impatient)
Shall we?

DR. MAYNARD
Yes, Gena. Let's proceed.

GENA
Good. Today we're testing a
parasitic cordyceps we discovered
in the ruins of the Black River
firestorm, a subspecies never
before recorded.

DARIUS
Miraculously there was one
surviving old-growth tree left
standing. It was in this tree that
the cordyceps was discovered.

KEHLER
I see.
(smiles)
So we've cornered the market on
this cordyceps?

DARIUS
We ran the GISD database and
there's no evidence of its
previous existence.

Gena walks over to her lab colleagues.

FRANZEN
Fungus got a genus latinate?

The terrarium crawls with insects.

DARIUS
 Because of its voracious behavior
 we've deemed it *cordyceps*
militaris cascadia.

Inside the Plexiglas walls Tor wears a respirator. He clicks two canisters in slots above the tank.

GENA
 Ready?

TOR
 (through speaker)
 Just let me get out of here before
 we're a "go".

Tor steps out, seals the door, pulls off his mask.

TOR (CONT'D)
 First law of scientific research?

RINJI
 Shit happens.

TOR
 First law of self preservation --

SAL
 -- don't be around when shit
 happens.

Gena crosses to a monitor.

GENA
 Come on, let's do this.

Tor slips on headphones and peers through the video camera.

TOR'S CAMERA POV

The terrarium fills the screen with crawling bugs.

GENA (CONT'D)
 Recording?

Julian gives the thumbs up.

Gena looks over to Darius and Dr. Maynard. Kehler and Franzen hover behind them speaking amongst themselves.

DR. MAYNARD
 (sotto)
 We need results Darius.

Darius doesn't break from staring at Gena.

DARIUS

(sotto)
Nobody's closing my lab.

Gena adjusts her mic.

GENA

Initializing testing of *Cordyceps
militaris cascadia* spore compound
with metabolic accelerant.

Pine beetles, ants and wasps scurry in the terrarium.

GENA (O.C.) (CONT'D)

Targeted arthropod is *Dendroctonus
ponderosae*, the mountain pine
beetle. Control targets are
Camponotus herculeanus, the
carpenter ant and the dominant
wasp, *Vespula pensylvanica*.

(beat)

Releasing spore. Now!

A YELLOW CLOUD jets into the terrarium.

The insects continue scurrying and swarming unaffected.

Claire and Sal peer close.

SAL

Full coverage.

CLAIRE

Continued confinement activity.

GENA

Give me the count Julian.

JULIAN

(eyes on a timer)
Hold on. Hold on. OK. In five,
four, three --

GENA

-- two, adding accelerant now.

WHITE FOG jets into the tank.

Gena turns to Darius. He meets her eye. COOL Beat.

GENA (CONT'D)

(to Tor)
What do we got?

TOR'S CAMERA POV

ZOOMS IN to accelerated activity. Beetles crawl up the
terrarium sides and attempt to lock onto the cover.

Tor lifts his head from the viewfinder, astounded.

TOR

No way.

Turns to Gena. She's staring at the monitor together with everybody else.

GENA

120 strength accelerant infection
rate at --
(checks timer)
-- plus 600 percent rate of
previous cordyceps.

DARIUS

What else?

INSERT VIDEO

ECU on a PINE BEETLE, its thorax bulging.

GENA (O.C.)

Thorax distension.

RINJI

Second stage consumption. Holy
shit!

GENA

(to herself)
It's gone systemic...

The PINE BEETLE sprouts a FUNGAL TENDRIL from its head.

TOR (O.C.)

(excited)
Initial cordyceps manifesting!

DARIUS

Control targets?

GENA

Unaffected.

DARIUS

Excellent.

INSERT VIDEO

A flurry of pine beetles scurry upwards to grip hard on the lid of the terrarium.

DARIUS (O.C.) (CONT'D)

The cordyceps secretes a chemical
compelling their prey to climb to
the highest branches of the forest
canopy and attach themselves in a
death grip.

A number of immobile beetles start to sprout tendrils over their bodies.

KEHLER
Jesus, is that...fungus?

Darius turns to Kehler and Franzen.

DARIUS
Then the mycelium mummifies the beetle, keeping it alive long enough to generate biomass that produces the fungal tendrils. These ultimately burst with spores, dispersing into the wind --

FRANZEN
-- to start new colonies and ensure its survival.

DARIUS
(surprised)
Yes.

DR. MAYNARD
On the rare occasion its been evidenced in nature, we're talking days--

KEHLER
And you've got it down to minutes.

DR. MAYNARD
It is remarkable.

TOR (O.C.)
We got implosions!

At the bottom of the terrarium WASPS and ANTS implode in WHITE PUFFS of slimy gel which quickly morph into a lattice work of expanding mycelium strands.

CLAIRE
Fuck!

RINJI
Oh, man...

Gena, face clenched, defeated. Checks her watch.

In CU the last WASPS and ANTS flutter wings and spasm legs, madly circling before IMPLODING, one by one.

SEVERAL PINE BEETLES remain unaffected by the cordyceps and scurry about.

GENA
Experiment concluded 13:57.

Darius crosses over for a closer look.

DARIUS
We got carriers. Our five percent seems to be on target.

CLAIRE

(ironic)

Hoo-rah. Our control targets were obliterated.

DARIUS

We'll dial down next time.

(off her look)

Come on, we're almost there.

SAL

Scrub the tank?

DARIUS

Do it.

Sal puts her hand on a lever.

GENA

Wait.

DARIUS

For what?

GENA

The unexpected.

Darius holds her cool stare.

DARIUS

OK. Let this stew a little longer.

She leans back and cuts her eyes to the monitor, watching as --

The gooey MYCELIUM STRANDS continue to SPREAD.

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

Darius stands with Dr. Maynard by his car.

DR. MAYNARD

I'll be suggesting we move to field testing.

DARIUS

To what extent?

DR. MAYNARD

Airborne cordyceps spore and accelerant diffusion concentrated on, let's say, a ten hectare reforestation plot?

Darius considers this.

DR. MAYNARD (CONT'D)

Your funding window is shrinking Darius. You don't get funds this quarter you might have to wait for next years budget. Or the year after.

DARIUS

OK then. But at a site I choose.

DR. MAYNARD

Suggestions?

DARIUS

A tract of Westfor lease on the Sisquiat Plateau.

DR. MAYNARD

The Black River.

DARIUS

Our cordyceps home ground.

DR. MAYNARD

We all just saw what it's capable of, so my question is, can you control it?

DARIUS

We'll control the accelerant accordingly.

Dr. Maynard walks to his car, then turns.

DR. MAYNARD

Maybe a more pertinent question is, can you control *her*?

INT. UNIVERSITY - WESTFOR LAB - DAY

The researchers crowd about watching the mycelium steadily fill the terrarium.

SAL

Why isn't it constraining itself?

RINJI

We've never seen it disregard environmental boundaries.

Gena stands behind them, silently watching as the mycelium starts warping the glass outwards.

JULIAN

Fuck, it's not stopping.

The glass CRACKS then the TERRARIUM EXPLODES, sending mycelium and glass shards throughout the Plexiglas room.

Everybody falls back.

SAL

Gas it! Tor!

Tor scrambles to the console but Gena is already there.

She pulls a lever down.

Nitrogen gas jets into the Plexiglas room freezing instantly the mycelium expansion into solid strands.

Darius appears.

DARIUS

"Unexpected" enough for you?

GENA

What'd you promise Maynard?

DARIUS

Nothing we can't deliver to keep this lab operating.

GENA

Can't wait.

DARIUS

Gena. We on the same team?

She backs off and begins to gather her things.

Rinji overhears, tries to rally the troops...

RINJI

Yeah, we're on the same team, right guys?

Air thick with tension, everybody goes about their business.

INSERT

A MICROSCOPIC CRACK in the ceiling of the Plexiglas room.

MICROSCOPIC ECU of a spiky, aerodynamic SPORE as it sails through the crack, and swept out the laboratory door--

INT. UNIVERSITY - HALLWAY - SAME

-- and down a hallway, riding the draft through a doorway into --

INT. UNIVERSITY - SECURITY OFFICE - DAY

-- the security office.

Vern sits in front of a bank of video surveillance monitors talking on his cell.

VERN (O.C.)
 Count me out tonight bud, I got a
 round-the-clocker to cover.
 Serious OT. You can take my coin
 at the next game.

Still in MICROSCOPIC ECU the spore begins to settle,
 falling slowly onto his ring finger.

Under the ring a rash provides the perfect landing spot.

VERN (O.C.) (CONT'D)
 Alright man, later.

EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT

A dilapidated Victorian house. MUSIC pulses from an open
 windows.

INT. HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Rinji applies flame to a pipeful of grass. He chokes and
 passes it to Claire who takes a hit.

Gena leans against the counter with a drink, looking
 through the window into the backyard...at Darius on his
 cell.

At the table, Tor eyes Gena as he yaks with Julian.

Sal walks in, leans beside Gena.

SAL
 Today's trial didn't bowl Darius'
 buds over.

GENA
 You'd be surprised.

JULIAN
 Really?

SAL
 You saying they like
 indiscriminate annihilation?

RINJI
 That mycelium web spread like some
 acid-crazed Spiderman.

CLAIRE
 A little nitro settled its rabid
 ass.

Claire passes the pipe to Gena who passes it straight to Rinji.

JULIAN

Too bad, man, I never seen any
'shroom like it.

Darius walks in.

RINJI

(exhaling)

I have. A magic one told me to eat
him and I ran up and down a
Peruvian beach like a happy freak.

Darius throws an arm around Rinji.

DARIUS

This boy's got the right idea.
We're dealing with a species that
builds natural alliances. It'll
make new life forms flourish in
its web.

Gena's having none of this.

GENA

It *consumed* everything in its web.

DARIUS

Wrong. Our carrier rate was
maintained.

CLAIRE

Darius is right.

GENA

Bullshit. We got a sledgehammer
when we need a scalpel.

DARIUS

We're headed in the right
direction.

Everybody chews on this a BEAT.

CLAIRE

They gonna give us the money?

DARIUS

If we comply, yes.

GENA

Comply?

With that, she knocks back her drink and walks out.

DARIUS

Gena?

Tor moves to follow then stops.

RINJI
Go cheer her up man.

TOR
There's nothing I can say to her.

Darius stares after her as she ascends the stairs.

DARIUS
Probably right.

Tor gives him a look that could break bones.

INT. HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATER

Claire, Julian, Sal, Rinji and Tor at the coffee table in the midst of a drinking game. Tor shakes dice and rolls. Laughs, shots drained.

Darius sits apart watching. He rises, walks out, disappears down the hall.

INT. HOUSE - BEDROOM

Darius steps into the darkened room. Gena sits in the window looking out at the night, turns to him.

GENA
I said it was over.

He closes the door. Leans against it.

DARIUS
You didn't mean it.

LATER

Sex on the floor. Straddled atop him, Gena comes hard.

BEAT

They catch their breathe and steal a look into each others eyes, then --

She throws a fist that he barely glances away.

She rolls off and turns away.

DARIUS (CONT'D)
What the hell?

GENA
I fucking meant it.

INT. UNIVERSITY - SECURITY OFFICE - NIGHT

Vern asleep in his chair before the monitors. His hand is swollen and discolored.

His ring lies on the desk beside a bottle of painkillers.

He scratches at his hand, harder and harder until he awakes.

VERN

Fuck!

He holds his hand to the light, inspects it, tears in his eyes.

Tiny lesions have appeared.

He stumbles to the bathroom and runs water over his hand.

VERN (CONT'D)

Fuckin' hell fuckin' hell fuckin' hell.

He rips at his shirt, revealing his arm swollen and discolored. He grips his skull, squeezing.

He CRIES in agony then CRASHES to the floor in the doorway his legs kicking and writhing.

INT. HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Darius pulls his jeans up, LAUGHS to himself as he threads his belt through the loops.

DARIUS

I try to understand. Swear I do.

Gena, still leaning against the bed, eyes hard as steel.

DARIUS (CONT'D)

I'm not the one hurting you.

GENA

Really?

DARIUS

You do enough of that yourself.

She grabs a blanket and covers herself. Looks away.

A KNOCK at the door. Someone tries the knob.

TOR (O.S.)

Gena?

(beat)

Why's the door locked?

GENA

What is it?
 (sotto, to Darius)
 You told me he'd left.

TOR (O.S.)

I mixed us a couple --

Before she can stop him Darius opens the door.

TOR (CONT'D)

-- drinks.

Tor has two pink drinks in his hand. He locks eyes with Darius then steps around him, locks eyes with Gena.

TOR (CONT'D)

Guess you need a smoke too.

Darius squeezes by Tor and walks off.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - NIGHT

Darius enters the building with his access card.

INT. UNIVERSITY - HALLWAY - NIGHT

Darius walks along a dimly lit high-ceilinged hallway, hears a METAL SCRAPING ahead.

He turns a corner and looks down an even darker hallway.

Something POUNDING.

VERN (O.C.)

Fuck! Oh god...

Darius moves along the wall when suddenly a shaft of light shoots down from above.

Ahead, a metal ladder is bolted to the wall. At the top, Vern struggles to hold open the hatch to the roof.

DARIUS

Hey!

Vern looks down, his face a strangled explosion of pain.

Vern holds his gaze a BEAT then struggles to climb through the hatch.

DARIUS (CONT'D)

What the hell ya doing?

VERN

Have to get...up...there.

But he can't lift the hatch any higher.

Vern looks at his swollen hand, then lets go and falls 5 hard meters to the cement floor.

THUD.

Black blood spreads under his head.

Coolly, Darius looks at the skin splitting on Vern's arm.

Vern's eyes are locked open. Darius crouches for a closer, curious look.

VERN (CONT'D)

Burning...

Vern's eyes click back and forth, face bathed in sweat.

VERN (CONT'D)

Higher...

Vern reaches out with his good hand but Darius backs off.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - WESTFOR LAB - DAY

Gena strikes her access card through the security panel.

RED LIGHT.

Tries again. RED LIGHT.

GENA

Aw, c'mon!

RINJI (O.C.)

What're you doing here?

She turns to see a sunglassesed Rinji pull up on his bike.

RINJI (CONT'D)

Thought you had the weekend off.

She thinks about this a Beat.

GENA

Why would you think that?

RINJI

Darius made me think that.

Gena nods to herself at that.

GENA

Just got to pick up some notes from yesterday.

(MORE)

GENA (CONT'D)
 (holds up her card)
 Doesn't work.

RINJI
 It's telling you...
 (leans in)
 Take a day off.

Rinji swipes his card. GREEN LIGHT.

RINJI (CONT'D)
 Ta-da!

INT. UNIVERSITY - WESTFOR LAB - DAY

They enter to discover Tor, Julian and Claire packing a flight cases with lab equipment.

Tor spots Gena and turns away.

GENA
 What's going on?

Claire comes up to her, excited.

CLAIRE
 Westfor approved our budget.

Gena tenses, looks about.

GENA
 What's going on Claire?

JULIAN
 We're heading to the field.

GENA
 As in, field lab?

Darius appears out of a doorway.

GENA (CONT'D)
 (to Darius)
 Why wasn't I told about this?

DARIUS
 Well now you know.

GENA
 Don't fuck with me, Darius.

DARIUS
 With yesterday's results Maynard
 was able to set up an advanced
 field test.

She looks about at all in the room.

GENA

To do what? Yesterday proved we're not ready.

Julian turns from his packing.

JULIAN

Sal and I, we're just lab assistants Gena. Slave to the wage and bills to pay.

She looks to Tor who looks away, then Rinji.

RINJI

Come on, this is your baby! Lap it up while we're flush!

GENA

Where's the field site?

DARIUS

The Sisquiat Plateau.

GENA

Our cordyceps natural environs.

RINJI

Back to the source.

DARIUS

If we're ever going to learn its origin its where we need to be.

GENA

What are you trying to accomplish?

RINJI

Save the forests, save the world?

DARIUS

Same as you, Gena. And I don't see time being on our side.

GENA

You think we're ready?

DARIUS

It comes down to this. We need the money. If we don't agree to the conditions it all stops here.

GENA

And you're all willing to chance it.

RINJI

All or nothing.

DARIUS

You with us?

EXT. UNIVERSITY - DAY

Gena kicks open the door, exiting the building with a box of belongings. A SECURITY GUARD sheepishly follows after.

She stops and stares into the open box.

SECURITY GUARD
Can I call you a cab?

GENA
Do me a favor, will ya?

SECURITY GUARD
Sure.

GENA
Let Vern know I won't be haunting
the halls any longer.

SECURITY GUARD
Vern's on sick leave, so I --

GENA
Sick leave? I just saw him
yesterday.
(beat)
He OK?

SECURITY GUARD
I don't really know. We were
informed this morning.

Gena ponders this a second, then Tor steps out of the building and they eyeball each other.

GENA
What do you want?

Tor takes the box from her hands and starts to walk then stops in his tracks without looking back.

TOR
You coming?

...then keeps on walking.

She follows him.

INT. UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL - CLINIC - NIGHT

A NURSE (20's) helps Dr. Maynard pull a quarantine hood and mask over his head and zips it onto a full body suit.

The Nurse checks all the seams.

NURSE
OK.

Dr. Maynard backs through a sealed revolving door labelled "Quarantine Area - Authorized Personnel Only".

He crosses a sterile, near-empty room towards a clear plastic tent surrounding a bed and peers through.

Vern's head is bulbous, swollen, lacerations open and oozing through the gauze on his forehead.

EXT. FIRESTORMED LANDSCAPE - NIGHT

A PLANE careens low over a moonlit landscape, spewing yellow fog.

It passes over the lone, unscathed TREE standing tall amongst the blackened stumps.

EXT. FOREST - AERIAL - DAY

A vast forested land. Craggy peaks, river valleys and waterfalls. Paradise.

WHOO-WHOO as a CARGO HELICOPTER soars into view bearing two 40-foot shipping containers in a sling.

Beyond it is the demarcation line where the rainforest stops and the smoldering remains of the firestorm begins.

EXT. FIRESTORMED FOREST - DAY

Hauling oversized backpacks, Gena and Tor look about at the ruins they traverse.

Tor offers a water bottle and casts a glance at the receding helicopter.

TOR

That them?

GENA

Who else?

TOR

I didn't see any Westfor markings.

GENA

Darius is flying under the radar.
Come on, we got miles of ash to
eat before we sleep.

He follows her into the wasteland.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - DAY

The helicopter hovers over a clearing and settles the containers in the dirt. The sling cables are released and the copter lands and powers down.

Eight PEOPLE jump out and scurry away from under the rotor blades.

Claire stares at the immense burn stretching down the valley.

Rinji crouches, sifts the ashen soil through his fingers.

WAYNE (50), a rugged mountain of a man, climbs down from the cockpit.

JOHNBOY (25), a fresh-faced surfer, and his girlfriend ROSE (20), a spunky, pierced waif, roll smokes and light up.

WAYNE

Listen up everybody! Listen up!

He crosses his massive arms revealing a faded Marine Corps tattoo.

Wayne's wife LIZZIE (45), a tough, calloused beauty, enters the fray.

LIZZIE

Wayne, I want the mess tent over by the stream.

CLAIRE

We gonna drink that water without a trace element check?

LIZZIE

Don't play smart, girl. The only purpose of that stream is to transport your shit downstream.

WAYNE

Okay everybody, you heard Lizzie.

LIZZIE

Anybody wants food, they better get humping!

Wayne signals to the pilot to take off then strides over and swings open the doors of a container: lab equipment, communications gear, ATV vehicles, gasoline barrels, etc.

He opens the refrigerated second container. Boxes of tree seedlings are packed to the ceiling.

He rips one open and inspects a handful of seedlings.

WAYNE
 (to himself)
 Looks good.

He hauls out a generator and fires it up. Lights and monitoring equipment blink on in the lab container.

Wayne unlocks a gun rack as Darius enters behind him.

Wayne clips a can of bear mace onto his belt, checks the clip on a 30 Ought Six and expertly loads a pump action shotgun.

Darius unlocks a military strongbox and pulls out a satellite phone and a laptop and plugs them in.

Wayne notes a PALLET OF CARDBOARD BOXES each marked with a big "M15 WP" and skull and crossbones.

WAYNE (CONT'D)
 What the fuck are white phosphorus grenades doing in my camp?

DARIUS
 Erases even the toughest stains.

Wayne grabs his shoulder and turns him around.

WAYNE
 You expecting some kinda mess?

DARIUS
 Contingency plan, Wayne. Be prepared. You know, 'be all you can be'.

Wayne shoves him backwards.

WAYNE
 If this site needs scrubbing because of the chemical stew your dumping, I'll be the one in charge.
 (beat)
 Understood?

Darius flips a salute.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

Gena pulls herself over a ledge and stares across charred stumps towards the Tree.

TOR
 Shit. There it is.

LATER

They throw off their packs and start unpacking gear, stealing glances to the Tree overhead.

GENA
I still don't believe it.
Everything else charred.

TOR
To a crisp.

Tor crouches and rubs traces of the yellow accelerant powder that covers the ground between his fingers

GENA
They must have been spraying for
at least a week.

She reaches into her pack and takes out a pistol, checks the cartridge.

TOR
Excuse me?

She aims the pistol out over the landscape, swings it around towards Tor.

She lowers it, looks at it in her palm.

GENA
My dad's old army issue.

TOR
OK. And?

She looks up at him, smiles.

GENA
There be bears in them hills?

TOR
Uh, yeah. And bees and beavers and
butterflies to boot.

(beat)
You want to tell me again what
we're *really* doing here?

GENA
Surveillance.

TOR
That's it? I prefer sabotage.

GENA
For now, anyway.

Tor shakes his head then reaches into his pack and pulls out a cross bow.

TOR
 C'mon, let's climb. We can do some
 "surveillance" of Darius' camp
 from up there.

A MOMENT LATER

Tor aims the crossbow up the Tree and fires a bolt trailing a climbing rope attached over the lowest limb.

He takes it up and slips it through his carabiner.

TOR (CONT'D)
 It's your show, you want the lead?

She looks up. Way up.

GENA
 Uh, no.

TOR
 Okay boss.

Tor begins to expertly ascend the Tree.

Gena snaps her harness on the line, takes a deep breathe and follows.

EXT. FIRESTORMED FOREST - DAY

Amidst a landscape reduced to cinder stumps, Darius sinks his shovel into the ashy soil.

He drops a few crumbs of soil into a test tube.

ECU on tiny strands of MYCELIUM twining through the soil, speckled in a yellow dusting.

He adds a few drops from a vial and the soil turns blood red.

Wayne surprises him from behind.

WAYNE
 Your seedlings going to take?

DARIUS
 Absolutely.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

Tor hoists himself into the canopy, a landscape of cones and moss. Eerily quiet.

He ties off and surveys the view.

GENA (O.C.)
 (distant)
 Everything all right up there?

TOR
 Want me to haul you up?

Twenty meters down, Gena clings on her rope and not liking it.

GENA
 I got it.

And continues up.

She reaches the top and ties off. Tor hunkers down beside her, his eyes darting about.

TOR
 No bugs. No birds. It's dead. But not.

Gena secures a grip and looks over the horizon.

Darius' camp, a kilometer in the distance.

TOR (CONT'D)
 There they are.

She reaches out with a hand for a grip and slips. Tor catches her arm.

TOR (CONT'D)
 Easy now.

GENA
 OK, I've had enough. You coming?

TOR
 Come on, enjoy the view.

Gena scans the devastated landscape, shakes her head in defeat and starts to descend.

TOR (CONT'D)
 Come on Gena, look beyond all that. Imagine what it'll be.

He sits back on a branch and --

In ECU his hand CRUSHES a PINE BEETLE that has a TENDRIL jutting out of its head.

A plume of YELLOW POWDER bursts upwards from the crushed carapace.

TOR (CONT'D)
 (calling down to her)
 We're gonna resurrect this. Just
 wait.

Tor stares out over the horizon then raises his hand and
 wipes the grime from his face.

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - COOK TENT - DAY

Darius sits apart from the others and pours a cup of
 coffee from a thermos.

Johnboy rolls in on his mountain bike and crashes down
 beside Rose who's studying a document like everyone else.

ROSE
 What's all this jumbo-mumbo?

LIZZIE
 It's your standard limited
 liability.

ROSE
 I can read that. But what about
 this Westfor crap at the back?

DARIUS
 Non-disclosure agreement.

JOHNBOY
 Top secret, huh?

DARIUS
 Oh yeah.

WAYNE
 Sign up and line up, pilgrim.

Everyone signs and Lizzie gathers up the documents.

WAYNE (CONT'D)
 Now that your blood's on the
 dotted, listen up! I know you hot-
 shot biologists think you know how
 to plant a tree. But not on slopes
 like these. Johnboy and Rose are
 here to make sure you do it
 without impaling yourselves.

JOHNBOY
 There's a foot of ash out there,
 Wayne. These trees aren't gonna
 take unless you got some kinda
 secret sauce.

RINJI
 (faux imperiously)
 You have no idea the powers we
 wield.

The DRONE of a large airplane approaching.

RINJI (CONT'D)

Magic time!

The ROAR builds.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - SAME

Everyone spills out of the tent as above a C-130 TANKER PLANE belches YELLOW FOG from multiple sprayer nozzles.

The mist blankets the firestormed ground, and wafts directly towards camp.

CLAIRE

Gena's accelerant.

DARIUS

Westfor's actually. This is the second application. Cordyceps were dumped at the beginning of the week.

Rose lifts her t-shirt over her mouth and nose.

ROSE

Something tells me none of this shit's been approved.

SAL

Don't worry, it's an organic compound.

ROSE

Yeah, so was the Black Death.

JOHNBOY

What the fuck is a cordyceps?

Claire gets in Darius' face and he steps back from the others.

CLAIRE

What the fuck is going on?

DARIUS

Westfor approved toxicity tests three weeks ago.

CLAIRE

You didn't keep us in the loop.

DARIUS

I've signed a non-disclosure as lab director, so, no, none of you were notified. Legally I couldn't.

CLAIRE

They had the accelerant for weeks.
What have they tweaked?

DARIUS

They didn't have to tweak a thing.
Gena created the perfect beast.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

Halfway down the Tree, Gena watches as the C-130 wheels overhead belching its yellow fog.

EXT. RESEARCH BLOCK - DAY

The firestormed earth slides treacherously down to the valley below.

The crew lean on their shovels, planting bags on their hips bulging with seedlings.

Wayne holds one up with a fat root ball.

WAYNE

We're planting a fir-hemlock mix together with some pine. Westfor wants 120 centimeter spacing between the seedlings.

SAL

And how do we stay planted on this cliff.

ROSE

I'll be planting right beside you.
Keep your eyes on me and not the bottom of the hill.

Rinji stands beside Rose looking her over.

RINJI

No problem there.

Johnboy doesn't like Rinji's wandering eye.

JOHNBOY

Your with me, noob. Let's start spiking some trees into this ground.

He takes Rinji by the arm and jumps with him over the slope and out of sight.

LATER

Rinji and Johnboy work across the scarred earth, prying holes with their shovels and plugging in seedlings.

Rose, Claire, Sal and Julian work in the distance behind them as storm clouds gather overhead.

As Johnboy wedges a hole milky-white MYCELIUM STRANDS of the cordyceps have started to sprout and expand.

JOHNBOY (CONT'D)

Looks like your freaky fungus is working overtime.

A thunderheads CRACKS.

RINJI

Well in that case...

Rinji pulls out a large joint.

RINJI (CONT'D)

Break time!

LATER

Rinji sparks up the joint and puffs away, Sal kneels down and checks out the mycelium strands.

SAL

Jesus, that's fast.

Rose takes the joint from Rinji then kneels down beside Sal checking it out.

ROSE

Does it know how to turn itself off?

(beat)

Or is it like cancer?

Rinji grabs the joint from Rose.

RINJI

Turn this stuff off? Mycelium's the foundation of all life in the forest. If it works here we could grow ganj in the Sahara.

CLAIRE

Can the irrational exuberance, OK Rinji?

RINJI

Irrational? We're the saviours of the world!

Rinji tokes deep as DISTANT THUNDER rolls across the heavens.

INT. DARIUS' LAB - DAY

Darius extracts a seedling from a pail of ash and mycelium strands. The roots glisten with vitality.

INT. HOSPITAL - QUARANTINE CLINIC - DAY

A deathly ill Vern lies strapped to the bed in the quarantine tent.

Dr. Maynard stands outside the tent staring in then backs away pulling out his cell.

INT. DARIUS' LAB - DAY

Darius on the sat phone.

DARIUS
How long's he been stable.

DR. MAYNARD (O.C.)
Five hours. We've got him heavily sedated.

DARIUS
Do I have to worry about this?

DR. MAYNARD (O.C.)
No. I've got it under control. You making headway?

Darius looks down at the glistening roots.

INT. HOSPITAL - QUARANTINE CLINIC - SAME

Vern, his face contorting in pain.

DARIUS (O.C.)
It looks promising.

DR. MAYNARD
I'll get back to you.

He moves to ring off but MISSES the button as Vern starts to shudder violently, arching off the table.

He lunges for the medical assistance call button striking it again and again.

DR. MAYNARD (CONT'D)
Hey!

Vern struggles against the straps with a ferocious power. His body thrashing. Spine bending insanely.

Then he literally compound fractures his forearm and twists half off the bed. SCREAMING.

TWO ORDERLIES in quarantine suits rush in and man-handle him back on the bed and strap him tight.

Vern's arm is bent grotesquely at an upward angle.

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - DARIUS' LAB - DAY

Darius sits with the phone in his hand. Listening. Turns it off.

WAYNE (O.C.)

We're closing it down for the day.

Darius jerks around.

Wayne stands there and takes a hit off a mickey flask.

A distant rumble of THUNDER.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Lightning's on the way and the kids are exposed out there.

DARIUS

We've still got an hour. The lower sector needs to be planted.

WAYNE

(nodding to the phone)

What's up?

DARIUS

Come on, we're trying to save the world and my people are willing to take some risks. You wussin' out?

WAYNE

You're sounding a little fuckin' delusional and messianic in my ears.

DARIUS

Like the shit they fed you in the marine core?

Wayne eyes him coldly.

WAYNE

It's my call.

EXT. BENEATH THE TREE - DUSK

Gena takes the last sip from a mug and throws the dregs away.

Tor puts his plate down and watches as Gena stands and stares in the direction of Darius' camp.

He comes up behind her.

TOR
So Gina, tell me. What's the plan?

GENA
The plan? Sabotage.

TOR
(ironic)
Great! And until a *real* plan is rolled out, what about...sex?

She turns to him, measuring, then...

GENA
And maybe you should just jerk off.

TOR
Might as well. Seems to be all we're doing out here anyway.

GENA
You know why we're here. To stop him.

Tor nods reflectively to himself.

TOR
Right. Stop him. Sabotage? Murder? Maybe?

GENA
Excuse me?

Tor looks off in the distance.

TOR
You told me you were done with him.

GENA
I am. Now.
(beat)
I'm sorry.

TOR
Seriously?

Gena nods, a tear drops.

GENA
Yes.

She moves into him, kissing his face. It heats up as he lets go, gives back.

TOR
Apology accepted.

Kissing him, she unbuttons her shirt.

Tor drops to his knees, tracing a line down her torso with his tongue as he does so.

She shivers, excited, staring at the moonlit Tree.

LATER

Tor is eerily distant as Gena climaxes atop him.

INTERCUT CONTAINER / MAYNARD'S LAB - NIGHT

Darius looks through the daily soil samples making notes.

The satellite phone RINGS. He checks the display then reluctantly answers.

DARIUS
What is it?

DR. MAYNARD
What the hell happened Darius?
It's attacked his vital organs,
eating him from the inside out.

DARIUS
Flesh-eating?

DR. MAYNARD
I got tissue samples being tested
as we speak.

DARIUS.
We're not the only lab on campus.
Who knows what's floating in the
ether.

DR. MAYNARD
It's fungal, Darius. It's fucking
airborne.

Darius expression hardens.

DARIUS
Who knows about this?

DR. MAYNARD
I can't keep this under wraps much
longer. This kid is gonna die.

DARIUS
Is it contained?

DR. MAYNARD
I said he's gonna die Darius.

DARIUS
Is it contained?!

DR. MAYNARD
Yes, it's contained. But I don't
know for how long I can ...we
should consider scrubbing the
site.

DARIUS
Maybe we should just scrub the
lab, the hospital.

DR. MAYNARD
We can't let --

Darius hangs up.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - COOK TENT - NIGHT

Wayne, Rose, Johnboy, Sal, Julian, Claire and Rinji drink
beer and box wine as RAIN pounds on the tent. All are
somber and tired from the day.

Rinji swigs deep then BURPS loud. Claire LAUGHS.

ROSE
Pig.

RINJI
Yes, I am "buta"! Oink!

Then Rose BELCHES even louder and deeper.

They all LAUGH, then revert to drinking silently,
until...

Darius throws the tent-flap open with a CRACK, jolting
everyone from their reverie.

CLAIRE
Fuck, Darius.

RINJI
No, fuck me.

CLAIRE
Shut it Rinji.
(to Darius)
The trees?

DARIUS
What about 'em?

JULIAN
They gonna take?

CLAIRE
Just give us the specs on the days
trials.

JOHNBOY
Never mind that. We gettin' paid?

Darius reaches into his side bag --

DARIUS
Paid?

-- and pulls out a bottle of Wild Turkey.

DARIUS (CONT'D)
Definitely.

He tosses it to Johnboy and a CHEER goes up until it slips through his hands and shatters on a rock.

RINJI
Boo.

JOHNBOY
That's what I call "bad omen".

Lizzie appears out of the darkness, surveys the scene.

LIZZIE
Come on Wayne. Must mean bedtime.

Wayne rises, looks hard at Darius.

WAYNE
Get these kids in bed. Long day tomorrow.

Wayne and Lizzie head off.

LIZZIE
Sleep tight.

JOHNBOY
(sotto)
Bed bugs bight.

Rose picks up the neck of the broken bottle.

ROSE
Good omen. If you're not gettin' drunk you'll screw all the better.

SAL
Well, well, well.

Rose pushes Johnboy out the tent and blows a kiss to the remaining crew.

RINJI
I like that girl.

CLAIRE
Darius?

DARIUS

Yes, Claire. Status report in the morning. Hit the sack. You heard the big man, long day tomorrow.

Darius walks off into the dark.

RINJI

The sack. Excellent.
(looks to Claire)
Let us choose partners for sex.

Sal stands and YAWNS.

SAL

Happy hunting Rinji.

She grabs Julian and pulls him up.

JULIAN

Let's get out of here before blood is spilled.

They head out.

Claire smirks at Rinji across the stove, then stands and undoes the top button of her blouse.

CLAIRE

It'll be Armageddons and dinosaurs
--

She reaches in and massages a breast.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

-- before survival of the species becomes a factor.

She undoes the last button, shimmies out of the blouse...

CLAIRE (CONT'D)

Anyways, I'm an expert at flying solo.

She tosses the blouse to him and walks off.

Rinji buries his face in it then jumps up.

RINJI

Hey, me too! Solo together!

EXT. THE TREE - NIGHT

Tor in his sleeping bag beside a gently snoring Gena, eyes wide frozen, staring into the stars.

Blinks. Crawls out without waking her.

The Tree towers above as his naked body shines ghostly in the moonlight. He looks up into the swaying branches.

Then he suddenly stiffens and his face contorts in a grimace. He feels his skull, shakes his head.

He takes a step to Gena but his body turns back towards the Tree where the climbing rope dangles.

He stands under it, studying it, shaking the pain shooting through his cranium.

Then he grabs it, clings on and begins to climb. Hand over hand. Fast. Powerful.

He disappears up into the darkness.

EXT. TOP OF THE TREE - NIGHT

Tor sways atop the Tree, his hands clenched in a death grip to the highest branch, his head thrown back, face rigid, staring, unblinking at the NEW MOON.

EXT. THE TREE - SAME

Gena asleep, restless dreaming.

INT. UNIVERSITY HOSPITAL - QUARANTINE CLINIC - NIGHT

Dr. Maynard stands in the near-dark. He opens a metal wall box and flicks some switches. Closes the box which is labelled 'Fire Sprinkler'.

INT. UNIVERSITY -

The clinic deserted except for Vern in the isolation tent in front of him.

Vern thrashes against the restraints, throws his head back, his spine twisting upwards, his body shuddering a violent dance.

Dr. Maynard edges forward, unable to tear himself away.

He has a HUGE SYRINGE in his gloved hand.

VERN (O.C.)

Help...me...higher...

Maynard unzips the tent, steps in, raises the syringe up.

Vern sees this and struggles, limbs twisting violently until -- CRACK -- breaks one leg - SNAP - an arm - CRUNCH - the other leg - the restraints ripped to shreds.

Vern attacks the last restraint with his teeth, chewing rabidly until he breaks free.

Maynard in shock, the syringe raised on high as Vern slithers off the table dragging his broken limbs behind him.

Maynard gathers his courage and lunges, stabbing the needle messily into Vern's throat, holding on through convulsions as he depresses the plunger.

A MOMENT LATER

Maynard sprays a liquid from a plastic bottle all over the inert, broken body of Vern. He looks about nervously.

The clinic is deserted.

He lights a match, takes a step back towards the tent flap, stares at the flame in his fingertips...

DR. MAYNARD

(to himself)

...rid of the evidence...rid of this..

Moves to toss the match when --

Vern swings out with one good arm and the match drops.

Maynard jumps back as Vern explodes in a ball of flame.

ALARMS sound and SPRINKLERS rain down.

EXT. THE TREE - MORNING

Rain drizzles on Gena's sleeping face. She awakes, sits up, looks about. No Tor.

She pulls on her shorts and a t-shirt.

GENA

Tor?

She spots his footsteps in the ash leading towards the Tree.

A CHILL streaks through her as she enters the shadow of the Tree. She spins around in panic.

It's nothing. She's alone.

Then she sees it. The climbing harness that had been tied to the first bough lies at the base of the Tree. She runs back a distance, turns back, looks up to see...

Tor, naked, clinging to the crown of the Tree.

GENA (CONT'D)

Tor! What are you doing?

She runs to her pack, takes out her camera and zooms in.

GENA'S POV

ZOOMING IN to Tor. He's hunched over, back to the lens, head thrust upwards at a strained angle.

Gena drops the camera to her side.

A MOMENT LATER

Gena flexes the crossbow to full tension aiming up the Tree.

GENA (CONT'D)

You better hold...

And let's it fly.

EXT. RESEARCH BLOCK - DAY

Darius examines the thriving seedlings that have sprung up.

The DRONE of a C-130 in the distance.

Darius looks to the sky as the C-130 swoops down and takes another foggy run over the landscape.

EXT. THE TREE - MORNING

Sweat drips as Gena clings to a bough with one hand while trying to hoist a few inches to a bough overhead.

Then the C-130 ROARS above blanketing her with WHITE FOG.

She slips, falling until a safety knot stops her. She grabs a limb and desperately worms out onto it.

She watches the white fog descend to earth.

GENA

Darius...

She looks up and can just glimpse Tor, paralyzed and transfixed on a point in the sky, then...the limb CRACKS!

She falls several meters before being caught by one that bends a few meters before spilling her the final meters to the earth.

She's stunned, bloody, scrapes and cuts, but alright.

She staggers up limping, looks up through the branches.

GENA (CONT'D)

Just hold on. I'm going for help!

EXT. FIRESTORMED FOREST - AERIAL - SAME

Gena staggers through the ash, a tiny speck amongst the devastation.

She reaches a green belt of forest and disappears inside.

We continue flying over the forest of green until the Research Camp is seen nestled in a clearing.

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - COOK TENT - MORNING

The crew eats breakfast.

Claire scowls at the ROAR of the C-130 heading off.

CLAIRE

They always wait till we're eating?

JOHNBOY

It's sure making the seedlings take whatever it is.

A BOOM OF THUNDER and it starts to rain hard.

JULIAN

Great. 10 hours of slog ahead.

Darius pulls back the tent flap and comes in cockily.

DARIUS

Greetings happy campers. We're upping the concentration this morning.

ROSE

I'm not hittin' the dirt until I see a...whaddy call it?

RINJI

Toxicity report?

ROSE

Yeah.

RINJI

It's bio organic. Harmless as vitamin C.

DARIUS

And it's also proprietary knowledge.

CLAIRE

Darius, you've seem to forgotten
we're scientists, not groupies who
serve your every whim.

Julian takes a step towards Darius, then looks beyond
him.

JULIAN

Gena?

She stands outside the open flap shivering in the rain.
Darius turns to her, stares.

WAYNE

Who the fuck is Gena?

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Rain DRIPS through the branches.

Darius, Johnboy and Wayne power on as Claire hangs back
with Gena who nurses her limp.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

They enter the remnants of the firestormed forest,
trudging through rain to the Tree.

Wayne sizes up the Tree.

WAYNE

Well ain't that something
spectacular.

Johnboy saddles up to him.

JOHNBOY

Last man standing, hey soldier?

Darius takes a backpack and starts to scavenge through
it.

WAYNE

What's your connection with her?

DARIUS

Former colleague.

WAYNE

The way you eyed her I'd say there
was more to it than that.

GENA (O.C.)

What are you doing in my stuff?

Darius drops the backpack and backs off a few steps.

GENA (CONT'D)
Still stealing other people's
work?

DARIUS
Thought it was Tor's. Maybe he's
on medication --

GENA
Bullshit.

WAYNE
We're here to rescue your boy. Why
the hostility?

CLAIRE
Let's hold off on the reunion and
get Tor down from this tree.

Johnboy eyes Tor atop the Tree through binoculars.

JOHNBOY
I want to know what I'm getting
into if I'm scaling that tree.

GENA
Maybe it's the butchered
accelerant served up by Westfor.

WAYNE
Take it down a notch, girl. This
is a humanitarian mission.

DARIUS
You're accelerant is actually
doing quite nicely.

CLAIRE
(to Johnboy)
Gimme those.

Claire eyes Tor through the binoculars.

CLAIRE (CONT'D)
(to Gena)
He hasn't responded to anything?

GENA
No.

Claire cups her hands to her mouth.

TOP OF TREE

Tor, from behind, clinging to the utmost branch, body
rigid with strained tendon and muscle, glistening.

CLAIRE (O.C.)
 (distant)
 Tor! It's Claire! We're gonna come
 up and get you down from there!

EXT. THE TREE - SAME

Wayne and Johnboy begin to tie off ropes, attach
 carabiners.

WAYNE
 It'll be slick in this rain.

Johnboy kicks up the mix of soft earth and ash.

JOHNBOY
 We dump from up there at least we
 got a soft tit to land on.

Just as Wayne is about to strap on a climbing belt Darius
 stops him.

DARIUS
 I'll take that.

WAYNE
 (shrugs)
 He's your boy.

A MOMENT LATER

Johnboy scales fast leaving Darius behind.

JOHNBOY
 Keepin' up, old man?

Darius pulls a knife out and digs at the bark. He draws
 out the blade -- a slick, gooey sap covers it.

DARIUS
 See ya at the top.

EXT. TOP OF THE TREE - DAY

Johnboy nears the top. Through the branches he spies Tor
 turned away from him, head tilted to the sky.

JOHNBOY
 Hey Tor. How's it hanging, man?

Tor clings to his branch, swaying in the breeze 75 meters
 over the earth.

Johnboy looks down to Darius.

JOHNBOY (CONT'D)
 Fuck, man. He's totally coma'd.

Darius climbs up beside him and looks to Tor whose face is turned away.

Johnboy looks to Darius for reassurance, but Darius just stares at the back of Tor's head.

JOHNBOY (CONT'D)

Tor, we're gonna get you down from here. Just loosen the grip so we can get a rope on 'ya.

(beat)

Gena's real worried about you.

Suddenly Tor's neck flinches, his head jolts upwards. Johnboy falls back.

JOHNBOY (CONT'D)

Fuck. Scared me there.

DARIUS

Easy now. Let me.

Darius eases in, scaling branch to branch, circles in and Tor's face is revealed for the first time.

Mouth a grimace. Yellow ooze drips from his chin, eyes unblinking, hands gripping, white-knuckled.

Darius finds a firm grip for himself then looks into Tor's eyes, listens to his RASPY breathing.

JOHNBOY (O.C.)

What's happened? Think something bit him?

DARIUS

(unconvincing)

Yeah. Maybe.

A MOMENT LATER

Johnboy pulls up a hatchet on a rope from below.

Darius ties a rope about the branch Tor's gripping then manages to secure a climbing harness about him.

Throughout this Tor remains utterly motionless.

Darius motions to the branch.

DARIUS (CONT'D)

Let's cut him free.

Johnboy chops at the branch as Darius studies Tor's condition.

The branch suddenly gives and Tor falls a few feet until it jerks taut. He swings over the 75m drop, hands still gripped tight.

Then his head turns and cranes for the sky.

Johnboy stares at Tor's white-knuckled grip.

JOHNBOY

This is too fucking weird, man. He ain't lettin' go.

DARIUS

Just start lowering him.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

Gena, Claire and Wayne stare upwards.

GENA

Come on...

CLAIRE

(shouting)
How is he?

BACK TO TOR

Immobile, swinging on the branch as Johnboy below and Darius above lower him meter by meter.

Just as Tor reaches Johnboy's level his head strains upwards, jerks back and forth, before his face goes slack, and his head sinks to his chest.

JOHNBOY

Hold on...Tor? Tor?!

DARIUS (O.C.)

What's is it?

Tor swings about into Johnboy's face.

JOHNBOY

I don't know. He just went limp.
But he's still got the branch in a fuckin' death grip.

Johnboy reaches out, hesitant, lifts Tor's chin just as Tor COUGHS into his face and awakes.

Repulsed, Johnboy slips down a few feet on his rope then wipes the spittle from his face.

JOHNBOY (CONT'D)

Fuck!

Tor slips the branch.

JOHNBOY (CONT'D)

Watch out below!

BASE OF THE TREE

They HEAR the branch crashing through the tree and scurry back. It buries itself in the earth beside them.

Wayne takes it up, inspects the marks left by Tor's grip.

JOHNBOY (O.C.) (CONT'D)

Lookout below!

Johnboy sits on a bough lowering Tor from 10 meters up.

Wayne has a folding stretcher ready. Tor reaches the girls hands and they lower him onto it.

Claire checks his vitals. Tor's eyes flit back and forth over faces, his breathing raspy, his hands cramped claws.

Johnboy touches down beside them, looks back up to see Darius perched on the bough. Claire follows his gaze.

CLAIRE

Come on. We gotta get him to camp.

DARIUS

You got enough bodies. I'm gonna look around.

Gena looks up now.

Darius smiles at her then starts back up the Tree.

WAYNE

Let him go. We can take care of this.

Johnboy and Wayne pick up the stretcher as the rain intensifies.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Come on. This weather ain't lettin' up.

Gena hangs back watching Darius disappear up the Tree, then gathers her things and scampers after the others.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Johnboy and Wayne struggle with Tor on the stretcher, Gena by his side holding one of his cramped hands.

WAYNE

You and Darius seem to know each other real well.

GENA

Whatever he's told you is a lie to get what he wants. That's how well I know him.

WAYNE

Really?

GENA

You want the long version or the short?

TOR

(croaking)

Take me up.

He explodes in a coughing fit.

GENA

It's okay. Everything's gonna be okay. We got you down.

Tor grips her hand harder, then slumps, exhausted.

TOR

Let me up...

JOHNBOY

Why's he sayin' that?

THUNDER CRASHES and the downpour increases.

WAYNE

Come on, let's pick it up.

They disappear into the darkening forest.

EXT. TOP OF THE TREE - DAY

The storm lashes the Tree.

Darius pulls himself to the crown, revelling in the thrashing wind and rain.

LIGHTNING rips up the sky.

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - CONTAINER - DAY

Lizzie, dripping wet, on her sat phone.

LIZZIE

What's the possibility of a medivac? Will update possible injuries soon.

DISPATCHER(V.O.)

(static)

No birds flying today.

(MORE)

DISPATCHER(V.O.) (CONT'D)
 80K winds offshore. Sopped in.
 Tomorrow. Maybe. Update re
 injuries.

LIZZIE
 Will do. Over.

Lizzie looks out into the rain. Black thunderclouds roll over the ashen landscape.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)
 Fuck.

A MOMENT LATER

Lizzie fires up an ATV and tears through the mud away from the camp.

EXT. RESEARCH BLOCK - DAY

Lizzie churns up toward the planters.

Rinji strikes a heroic pose on a hillside, holding his shovel up like a lance.

RINJI
 Come Darkness!

At the foot of the hill Rose and Sal wave frantically up to Rinji. Julian just shakes his head.

ROSE
 You got a death wish? Metal,
 lightning. No ay mixta!

Lizzie careens to a stop in the mud.

LIZZIE
 Get down here! Now!

Rinji stabs his shovel to the sky again.

RINJI
 Blow wind blow!

A smoking bolt of lightning CRACKS beside Rinji knocking him flying.

ROSE & SAL
 Rinji!

Rose and Sal run up to Rinji and he rises, his hair a static wig.

LIZZIE
 Okay, that's it!

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - DAY

Tor is borne into a deserted camp.

WAYNE

Lizzie?!

CLAIRE

Let's get him in the tent.

WAYNE

Where the hell is she?

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - COOK TENT - DAY

They place Tor on a table then fall back, catching their breathe.

Tor grabs at his head, thrashes about, sputters.

TOR

I can't...higher...higher. In my head...let me up...

Gena uses all her strength to hold him down.

His eyes flick back and forth, then he passes out.

GENA

We have to get him to a hospital.

Wayne grabs a walkie-talkie, dials into a frequency.

WAYNE

(shouting)

Lizzie? Where are you?

Claire feels Tor's forehead, his neck pulse.

CLAIRE

He's burning up, pulse is racing.

WAYNE

Lizzie?

Wayne slams the walkie-talkie down.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Fuck! Where is she?

(turns to Gena)

Is he allergic to anything? Wasp stings?

GENA

No. Not that I know of.

(to Claire)

Help me.

Wayne studies her as she searches Tor's face, his hair.

WAYNE

This storm'll ground any medivac.
We'll have to wait.

GENA

That's not good enough.

Gena straightens up, finding nothing.

WAYNE

It's a fact, stranger. And that's
if we're lucky.

CLAIRE

All I got is basic first aid.

GENA

(to Wayne)
What about you?

WAYNE

Heap of experience stitchin' up
axed shins, sawed fingers,
battlefield lesions.
(steps back from Tor)
But this?

JOHNBOY

Maybe he's got something
infectious.

WAYNE

Infectious?

JOHNBOY

Maybe something, I don't know, got
into him? Fuck, I don't know, but
something's got into him.

WAYNE

So...if something got into him?

CLAIRE

I don't know jack about treating
infectious diseases.
(beat)
Besides quarantine.

They all exchange glances, then --

JOHNBOY

Oh man, look at his head!

Tor lurches, his body quaking. Small NODES bubble and
pulse across his forehead.

Gena moves to take a closer look and then Tor thrashes so violently he kicks Johnboy to the ground.

JOHNBOY (CONT'D)
 Fuck, strap him down, give him something!

Wayne steps in and punches Tor on the jaw, knocking him out.

GENA
 What you do that for?

WAYNE
 'cause it works.

Lizzie and the others hustle into the tent as a massive clap of THUNDER booms.

They all stare at Tor.

RINJI
 Oh, man. Look at him.

ROSE
 He's not okay.

WAYNE
 Definitely not.

LIZZIE
 What the fuck is going on?

Lizzie looks hard at Tor, thinking.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)
 Okay. Everybody out of here. I gotta talk to Wayne.

They all start to back off slowly.

JULIAN
 What happened to him?

SAL
 He needs medical attention.

LIZZIE
 Get the hell out of here! Now!
 (turns to Gena)
 You. What's your name again?

GENA
 Gena.

SAL
 He needs a hospital.

LIZZIE
 Get outta here!

They all back out.

Lizzie grabs Gena's arm. Hard.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)
You're staying here.

They exchange glances then Lizzie focuses on Tor.

WAYNE
What are you thinking?

LIZZIE
(to Gena)
What's wrong with him?

Gena wrenches her arm from Lizzie's grasp.

GENA
I'm not sure.

WAYNE
I thought you were a doctor?

GENA
Not the kind we're looking for.

Lizzie backs away from Tor.

LIZZIE
I want everyone to keep the hell
away from him.

Wayne gets in Gena's face.

WAYNE
Hey doc? This got anything to do
with the shit you're spraying?

Gena looks hard at Tor. Clenches her eyes shut a beat.
Turns to Wayne.

GENA
I only know half the equation. You
want the other, talk to Darius.

WAYNE
Don't worry about that.
(beat)
We'll quarantine this guy until we
know what we're dealing with.

LIZZIE
And you'll give us your fifty-
percent. Now.

Gena looks at Lizzie, weighing her response.

GENA

OK. Here it is. Cordyceps are a species-specific parasitic fungus that only attack one kind of insect.

LIZZIE

The pine beetle.

GENA

Right. Ours anyway. Other cordyceps attack other insect species. They attack the brain, driving it to crawl to the light, the sun. And in forests, this means the forest canopy.

WAYNE

That's one smart fuckin' fungus.

GENA

And when the cordyceps has had its feed and is fully developed the beetle's long dead by this time.

LIZZIE

Then what?

GENA

Well, the cordyceps has created the prime opportunity to diversify and expand its territory, spreading its spores to the winds.

LIZZIE

So you're saying this thing, this fungus...thinks?

WAYNE

Animal instinct.

LIZZIE

You mean vegetable.

GENA

No. Fungi takes in oxygen for their digestion and metabolism and exhales carbon dioxide.

WAYNE

Just like us.

GENA

And just like us it keeps track of species so they don't become overly dominant in an ecosystem.

LIZZIE

And if so...it culls them?

GENA

Exactly. If the cordyceps wasn't species-specific it could obliterate an ecosystem, infesting all insect species, and, in theory --

WAYNE

-- eliminate its food source.

Lizzie steps towards Gena.

LIZZIE

What are you saying?

GENA

I gave you my 50 percent. You can get the other 50 from Darius.

LIZZIE

(to Wayne)

Where the fuck is he?

Gena looks over to Tor who's still knocked out, his chest heaving, sweat dripping.

Lizzie follows her gaze then grabs Gena and twists her around.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)

What's happening here?

WAYNE

She's saying the cordyceps is expanding its menu.

Lizzie slips her grip and steps away from Tor.

GENA

(to herself)

Zoonosis.

LIZZIE

What?

GENA

An infectious disease transmitted from one species to another.

Lizzie steps back, taking Wayne by the arm.

LIZZIE

(to Gena)

You stay here and keep an eye on him.

(beat)

Wayne, let's go.

She stomps out into the rain.

WAYNE

I don't know what you were doing out there at the Tree but I'd re-work that broken strategy.

GENA

We need to evacuate him.

LIZZIE

Wayne! Let's go!

WAYNE

You just play it safe now girl.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - DAY

Johnboy walks into the treeline, unzips, urinates.

Looking down, he stiffens, then staggers back.

He steps back in the open and sees Rose enter their tent.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

Darius rappels to the base and begins to inspect the base. He selects a spot, pries some earth up with a broken limb, then begins to dig in with bare hands.

INT. JOHNBOY & ROSE'S TENT - DAY

Johnboy thrusts into Rose. She's into it but a look show she's uneasy too.

ROSE

Take it easy. I'm flesh.

JOHNBOY

And I'm bone.

She pushes back on his shoulders, locks eyes.

ROSE

Funny ha. Now go slow.

He blinks, starts up with a few gentle strokes.

ROSE (CONT'D)

Better.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

Enervated, Darius is now up to his hips in the soil and ash. He straightens up and wipes his brow.

The rain drizzles. Otherwise, silence. Eerie.

Then the ground gives and he slips into the earth.

INT. UNDERNEATH THE TREE - SAME

Shafts of light find Darius in a small cavern in the root system. Tallowy fungus pulses along the earthen walls.

Darius pricks the surface of the fungus with his knife and it heaves upwards and starts to envelop it.

He tries to extract it but it's stuck in the slimy surface. Darius lets go as the fungus consumes the knife.

He holds his palm above the fungus as if to gauge its heat and watches it heave towards his flesh.

At the brush of contact his eyes widen, then narrow in concentration. He plunges his hand into it, gropes around, then pulls out clutching the knife.

He looks down to see the fungus crawling up his legs. He struggles, panics as it swarms over him.

He flails at roots to pull himself to the surface but is pulled back down violently into its grasp, consuming him.

Rose climaxes as Johnboy plows into her.

INT. JOHNBOY & ROSE'S TENT - DAY

Johnboy and Rose lie entwined, exhausted.

ROSE

You were so deep into me.

JOHNBOY

Like I'd crawled right inside.

She caresses him. He's burning up, skin splotched red.

ROSE

You're hot, baby.

He looks down between them, smiles.

JOHNBOY

And hard.

ROSE

I mean fever, stupid.

A subtle twitch quakes through his body. He looks her over, caresses her face. Kneads her face...

ROSE (CONT'D)

Hey!

He pushes her back - a little too hard.

ROSE (CONT'D)

Stop, what are --

Rips her legs apart and holds her down, knuckles white on her biceps.

ROSE (CONT'D)

Stop it!

She knees him hard but to no avail. He forces himself inside her, harder and harder.

ROSE (CONT'D)

(crying)

Johnboy, stop!

He hesitates a second, choking back a cry.

ROSE (CONT'D)

You're hurting me!

He clamps his mouth over hers, silencing her, suffocating her.

Her legs thrash and eyes bulge until she collapses.

Johnboy releases his grip and rears back, SCREAMING.

Inside his gaping mouth is a web of glistening MYCELIUM.

EXT. THE TREE - DAY

Rain drums the puddles at the base of the Tree.

Suddenly a pale hand thrusts out of the muck and with grim determination Darius pulls his mud-slicked self out from the depths.

EXT. FOREST - DAY

Darius, runs through the forest, flitting from shadow to light, a beast streaked in mud.

EXT. JOHNBOY & ROSE'S TENT - DAY

Johnboy steps out, eyes hollow, wipes at his mouth.

Behind him, a glimpse of Rose sprawled in the tent.

He looks one way, the other, stomps off.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - DAY

Darius stands in the bush watching Johnboy stride off.
Emerging unseen, he heads to one of the containers.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - COOK TENT - DAY

Gena sits across the tent from Tor. He seems to be sleeping but then his head turns slowly, startling her.

TOR

Can I get some water?

GENA

Hey. Yeah. Just stay there.

She goes to the water container, fills a cup, hand shaking.

She turns back and he's standing, leaning against the table.

GENA (CONT'D)

Get back up there and lie down.

Tor twists a smile.

TOR

Come and help me.

She hesitates, takes a step towards him. Holds out the cup.

GENA

Drink.

She tries to move her fingers from his touch as he grasps at the cup but his brush against hers.

She steps back, wiping her fingers against her thigh.

He watches this as he drinks thirstily.

She can't keep her eyes off the THREE SMALL NODES on his forehead.

He holds out the glass.

TOR

More.

She takes it and turns around, starts to fill it.

TOR (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 You're scared.
 (beat)
 Of me.

She continues to pour, the water running over the rim.

GENA
 We're gonna get you outta here. To
 a hospital. It's going to be OK.

She wills herself to turn back to him.

But he's gone.

INT. SAL & JULIAN'S TENT - DAY

Sal pulls a sweater over her head as the TENT FLAP
 RUSTLES behind her.

SAL
 Get packed 'cause we're buggin'
 outta here.

An arm whips around her neck and hurls her to the ground.

Johnboy throws himself on her.

She SCREAMS but then he's got a hand over her mouth.

INT/EXT. RINJI'S TENT - SAME

Rinji tokes on a bong, hears a MUFFLED SCREAM. He coughs
 a cloud then peaks out at Julian and Sal's tent.

There's a struggle going on inside.

RINJI
 Look who's havin' all the fun...

Rinji steps outside.

Sal SCREAMS.

RINJI (CONT'D)
 Hey you guys --

JULIAN (O.C.)
 Sal!

Rinji turns to see Julian sprinting towards him, he grabs
 Rinji's planting shovel as he passes by.

INT. SAL & JULIAN'S TENT - SAME

Julian rips open the tent flap.

Sal tears into Johnboy's eyes as he rips at her clothes.

Julian slams the shovel across Johnboy's head.

Johnboy pauses a beat as OOZE spurts from his skull.

Then he tears into Sal again.

Julian whacks him again, BLOOD SPRAYS but Johnboy doesn't react and now he thrusts into Sal just as Julian swings with the cutting edge.

Johnboy flops to the side with his skull cleaved open. An expanding web of mycelium inches out, beginning to encase his head.

Rinji appears behind Julian.

RINJI

Holy. Shit.

Julian hacks the shovel again and again into Johnboy then grabs Sal and drags her out.

Rinji staggers out after them.

JULIAN

Get gas. Lots of it.

Rinji stands, stunned. Looks to the cook tent.

RINJI

Tor...

JULIAN

Get some fucking gas!

Rinji wakes from his catatonia and sprints off.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - DAY

Wayne runs across the camp, Gena and Lizzie trailing behind him. Rain pours, the mud getting slicker.

Rinji stumbles out of a container struggling with a 10 gallon gas can.

WAYNE

What the fuck?

Wayne grabs him by the scruff.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Where you going with the gas?

GENA

Rinji?

RINJI
 Ah, Gena, it's all gone to shit.
 It's mutated.

WAYNE
 Mutated?

Wayne shakes him.

RINJI
Militaris Cascadia.

WAYNE
 What are you talking about?

RINJI
Militaris Cascadia!

Wayne lets go, steps back.

GENA
 The cordyceps.

Rinji shakes free from Wayne, grabs the can and runs.

GENA (CONT'D)
 Rinji! Wait!

She runs after him.

WAYNE
 Fuck!

EXT. SAL & JULIAN'S TENT - DAY

The TENT BURNS ferociously.

Julian holds Sal in his arms, her eyes wide in shock.

Gena watches the flames as Claire holds Rose back.

Lizzie stands several meters away a rifle at the ready.

Then there's movement and Johnboy's corpse struggles upwards in the flames.

WAYNE
 Aw, fuckin' hell.

Coolly, Wayne raises his shotgun.

He BLASTS the thrashing corpse until it collapses back into the cauldron of flames.

Rinji drops to his knees and vomits in the mud.

ROSE
 You fucking killed him! You all
 fucking killed him!

She breaks from Claire and makes a run at Julian but Lizzie steps in front of her, rifle raised.

LIZZIE

No.

Rose breaks down, head in hands, sobbing.

Gena and Claire approach.

Wayne turns back to Julian and Sal who watch the flames.

WAYNE

What happened in there?

JULIAN

Nothing happened.

WAYNE

Then why'd you split his skull?

SAL

We saw it Gena. It had him.

She glances furtively at Julian.

JULIAN

Fucking mycelium was leaking out of him.

SAL

It was...eating him.

JULIAN

I did what I had to do.

Rinji's looking at the dirt between his boots.

RINJI

I saw it all. It's OK. Julian had to do it.

LIZZIE

Sal needs to be quarantined.

Wayne raises his shotgun towards Julian and Sal.

Julian stands in front of her.

JULIAN

Don't point that at her.

WAYNE

Just a precaution.

JULIAN

She hasn't done anything! She was the one who was attacked.

CLAIRE

Exactly.

Sal plays it hard.

SAL

I said I'm OK.

She isn't, shaking under Julian's embrace.

Wayne racks a shell into the barrel.

WAYNE

Let go of her. NOW! Or I'll
fuckin' blow you both away!

JULIAN

Leave us alone!

Sal starts to peel his hands off her.

SAL

It's OK baby.

JULIAN

No.

SAL

I have to go. You know I do.

Julian drops his hands, defeated, sinks to his knees.

CLAIRE

Just a precaution. It's best for
all of us.

GENA

(backing away)
She's right, Julian.

JULIAN

How do you know? You haven't been
right so far, have you?

Gena stares into the distance.

GENA

I lost my position at the
university opposing this fuckin'
trial.

(turns to him,
pissed)

You know this already. What are
you blaming me for?

WAYNE

And where the fuck is Darius?

A CRASH through the underbrush. All turn to see --

Tor emerging from the forest, wavering upright, his head grotesquely distended, pulsing with nodes.

He spots them then scrambles fast through the mud towards the firestormed landscape beyond.

RINJI

Oh, fuck man! I gotta get outta here.

Wayne looks back and forth between the retreating Tor, Rose and Julian and Sal.

WAYNE

Lizzie, take Rose and Sal to the cook tent but keep you're distance. Lots of it.

GENA

Come on. We have to help Tor.

She starts off after him.

RINJI

Help him? Are you fucking kidding? After all the shit we just seen?

Gena turns back.

RINJI (CONT'D)

Gena, it's mutated. We gotta get outta here.

GENA

We have to stop him.

RINJI

Stop him? You mean like...even if it means killing him?

All turn to Gena.

GENA

If it comes to that.

Wayne nods, then looks to Julian.

WAYNE

(to Lizzie)
Take him too.

SAL

No! Leave him alone!

WAYNE

Take him, Lizzie. If he doesn't
come peaceful, shoot him. Claire,
Rinji? Let's go.

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - CONTAINER - DAY

Darius lies huddled at the back of the container in the
dark, shaking, his head pulsing with nodes.

EXT. FIRESTORMED FOREST - DAY

Gena, Wayne, Claire and Rinji trudge through the mud and
blackened stumps.

In the distance, Tor, his clothing shredded, clings to
the top of a blackened stump, five meters off the ground.

Straining for the sky, his skin covered in nodes and pus-
dripping lesions.

Gena approaches slowly.

GENA

(to herself)

Tor?

RINJI

Gena. Stop.

Wayne pulls her back.

WAYNE

No closer.

Gena looks at the others for help. Nothing coming.

Wayne stares up at Tor, clenches his rifle.

RINJI

There's nothing we can do. You
guys know there's nothing we can
do. What the fuck are we doing
here?!

CLAIRE

We can't leave him here. We have --

RINJI

Fuckin' rights we can. Leave him
right here and get the fuck out.

GENA

Rinji's right. We can't control
this.

(beat)

Everything in the lab proved that
didn't it?

She turns on Claire and Rinji.

GENA (CONT'D)
 Didn't it?

WAYNE
 What?

RINJI
 We should just walk outta here,
 get to the service road in a
 couple days, we got food --

WAYNE
 Shut up! Let me think.

The rain pours. They stare at Tor.

Tor lets out a WHINING SHRIEK as the nodes on his head
 and chest writhe fast like snakes under the skin.

His grip hardens on the branch, it splinters and he
 crashes to the ground.

Tor's shakes hyper-violently then abruptly rears up and
 bends backwards until his back - CRACK! - breaks.

GENA
 Tor!

She moves to him but Claire holds her back.

Tor starts to slither up the stump, dragging his broken
 body after him.

RINJI
 Holy. Fuckin'. Shit.

Wayne raises the shotgun, readies to shoot.

Tor reaches the top and latches on again, turns his head
 to the sky. A horrific GROAN of agony.

Gena backs away from it all.

RINJI (CONT'D)
 Oh, man, we're all going to die.

And then --

Tor's skull CRACKS open at the forehead and a steel-grey
 tendril pokes out, rising slowly upwards.

WAYNE
 Jesus.

The tendril doesn't stop until it's a meter long.

GENA
 (crying)
 Shoot him!

The tendril sways in the wind and rain, hypnotically catching everyone's attention until --

A PULSE OF MASS slithers up its length and collects at the throbbing end.

RINJI
 Shoot him Wayne! Kill him!

GENA
 The cordyceps! Wayne!
 (turns to him)
 Kill him! Before the spores are released. Kill him!

Too late.

The pulsing tendril blooms open at the top and a cloud of spores are released into the wind.

CLAIRE
 Run!

All fall back and scatter.

Except Gena. She's got her pistol in her shaking hand.

CLAIRE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 Come on!

Crying, she takes aim and FIRES SIX ROUNDS into Tor's chest.

She stumbles, back-peddaling away from the carnage, the smoking pistol in her grip.

RINJI
 Come on, this way, downwind!

Tor's body collapses into a dusty shell of its former self and spills down the stump onto the charred earth.

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - CONTAINER - DAY

Darius stands in front of a blurry metal mirror in a fresh set of clothes, checking himself out.

Then he punches the mirror with wicked strength contorting his image and walks off.

EXT. COOK TENT - DAY

Julian and Sal huddle at a table at the back of the tent. He holds her tight, stifling her shivers.

On the other side of the tent Rose sits slumped at another table. Her head bowed, hair over her face.

At the front in the kitchen area Lizzie pours a cup of coffee, her rifle riding in the clench of an arm.

JULIAN
(towards Lizzie)
You heard those shots? Somebody's
being murdered.

Lizzie takes a seat, lays the rifle pointed towards her quarantined prisoners.

LIZZIE
You just keep your ass planted
where it's at. Nobody's leaving
without a chopper and they're
grounded until this weather lifts.

JULIAN
You could be killing us all with
that attitude.

LIZZIE
Rinji said you were just lab
assistants. Not scientists.

JULIAN
So?

LIZZIE
Just wondering how much you know.

JULIAN
Enough to know there's genetically-
modified killer fungus under the
earth that's just looking for an
excuse to rise to the occasion.

DARIUS (O.C.)
He's right.

They all turn to see Darius.

LIZZIE
Where the hell you been?

Darius ignores her and walks to the water cask and pours a large glass. He drains it, eyeing all over the rim.

JULIAN
Johnboy's dead, man.

WAYNE (O.C.)
Tor as well.

Wayne strides in with Gena, Claire and Rinji behind him.

RINJI

Oh, man, you shoulda seen him. If it wasn't for Gena he'd have suffered even more.

SAL

Did you kill him? Before, I mean...he's really dead?

Darius looks around at them all. Cool and collected.

SAL (CONT'D)

You have to tell me how he died.

JULIAN

It's OK baby. That's not gonna happen to you.

SAL

I need to know what's coming.

Wayne corrals Gena, Claire, Rinji and Darius with his rifle.

WAYNE

All of you. Out. Pow-wow time. Lizzie, keep the vigil.

EXT. COOK TENT - SAME

They stand in the downpour, Lizzie in the tent opening, one eye on the interior.

WAYNE

What'd you find at the tree, smart guy?

DARIUS

That some life forms evolve dramatically when under sustained attack.

WAYNE

Oh really?

DARIUS

And others? They just die.

CLAIRE

What's that supposed to mean, it's targeting us?

DARIUS

The fire took its food.

GENA

Bullshit. It's the accelerant.

DARIUS

A mobile host is what it needs to prosper.

(beat)

What's done is done.

Everybody measures everybody, then --

WAYNE

Nobody fuckin' move. Lizzie, shoot the first body that twitches.

He strides off.

Gena glares at Darius.

GENA

You should never have come here. How did you expect to control it?

DARIUS

You were right. Now the only important thing for us is to get out of here.

GENA

If those spores make it to a city...

CLAIRE

It could be killing us already.

RINJI

We don't know that. Come on, the pathology was never consistent.

LIZZIE

What are you talking about?

RINJI

During our lab trials --

GENA

-- there was no common infection pattern. Metabolism, blood sugar, body mass, immunodeficiency. We never cracked the reasons why some targets survived.

(beat)

Or why some became carriers.

LIZZIE

Carriers?

DARIUS

Protectors of the strain, of the species, infecting en-masse through insemination.

GENA

Carriers with no outward sign of infection. Theoretically, they could live with it forever.

A shotgun BOOMS nearby and everyone jumps.

Wayne comes bearing a metal can, the shotgun and another rifle under his arm.

He passes the shotgun to Rinji.

WAYNE

You know how to use this.

RINJI

Fuck yeah.

Rinji RACKS A ROUND into the chamber.

Wayne corrals everyone in the tent again.

WAYNE

No one's leaving until a HAZMAT crew comes and clears us for evacuation.

An uneasy silence.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Everyone take a seat and my advice.

JULIAN

Your advice?

WAYNE

Fuckin' A. As the leader of the pack.

(beat)

Now, don't go testing Lizzie. That rifles's got a hair trigger.

JULIAN

You'd really kill us, wouldn't you?

Lizzie swings and sights at Julian from the hip.

LIZZIE

In a heartbeat.

WAYNE

Now that we're all reading the same survival manual, Gena, Darius? Let's go scrub some hazardous waste.

Claire looks about.

CLAIRE

Fuck this. I ain't staying in here.

WAYNE

Yes you are.

CLAIRE

Why?

WAYNE

'Cause I don't need you out here. Just keep your distance from the others.

Claire tries to push through but Wayne grips her arm until she succumbs.

CLAIRE

Gena, don't leave me in here!

GENA

Wayne, let her go. She hasn't been near any of this.

WAYNE

She carried Tor from the Tree.

GENA

Just like me.

WAYNE

She stays. And you come with me.

(to Rinji)

Be a good soldier and do what she says or she'll drop you faster than a sack of burning shit.

He pushes Gena and a smiling Darius out into the rain.

CLAIRE

Gena?!

Rose. Head hanging. Blood-shot eyes bulging through her bangs.

EXT. FIRESTORMED FOREST - DAY

Wayne, Gena and Darius stand beside a large stump several meters from Tor's remains.

Gena hides her tears from them. Wayne turns to her.

GENA

What are we doing here?

WAYNE
Testing Willie Pete.
Any last words?

GENA
Yeah. Fuck you.

Darius, eerily silent behind them.

WAYNE
Amen. Keep back and don't breathe
the smoke. It'll probably kill ya.

DARIUS
Really?

WAYNE
Just as sure as any incendiary
particles that land on you'll burn
through your flesh and incite some
major organ failure.

GENA
Jesus Christ.

DARIUS
Nature can be a terrible beast to
tame.

WAYNE
Each passing minute you sound more
and more like a pompous dime-store
preacher, Darius.
(beat)
Ain't that right Gena?

Darius looks hard at him.

DARIUS
Let's do this.

WAYNE
Well, stand the fuck back then.

Darius and Gena step behind the stump.

Wayne throws a white phosphorous incendiary bomb that
lands a meter from Tor's gruesome remains.

Gena watches as a BLISTERING WHITE FLAME EXPLODES and she
cringes from the heat.

They watch the corpse burn aggressively, flaring multi-
hued blue and white through the soil and ash.

WAYNE (CONT'D)
Good ol' Willie Pete should
incinerate that Tree mighty fast
as well.

GENA

Oh no. That Tree is our only key
to an antidote to what's
happening.

Wayne cocks his head to the searing flame.

WAYNE

That's the antidote.

GENA

Are you kidding me? A raging
firestorm runs through here and
this Tree is the last man
standing. Everything else
obliterated. You think that's some
kinda dumb break?

WAYNE

I'd call it a freak of nature.

GENA

What's the antidote for snakebite
you dumb shit?

Wayne stalks up to her, jabs the rifle under her chin.

WAYNE

Well professor, that must be snake
venom. But you know what, there's
no correlation here I can sense,
so I say, burn the fucker down.

DARIUS

In that tree a colony of cordyceps
has established itself and somehow
was able to fend off the flames.

Gena stares at Darius, questioning...

GENA

Oh, so you seen the light?

Wayne raises the rifle.

WAYNE

Fend off the flames? With what,
their little ladder truck and
asbestos suits.

DARIUS

As much as I hate to admit it...

WAYNE

She's right?

He prods Gena with the shotgun into the open.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

I ain't Greenpeace. I'm fucking
Green Beret.

She turns back hard on him.

GENA

Didn't you take some kinda oath to
protect and serve?

WAYNE

This is the flip side, kid. I see
a threat, I hunt it down and
exterminate it.

He rips the daypack from her shoulders.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Starting with this.

He takes the pistol out and stuffs it in his belt.

GENA

It's an heirloom. It belonged to
my Dad.

WAYNE

And your daddy now is...?

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - CONTAINER - DAY

Darius and Gena stash white phosphorous grenades in
backpacks as Wayne covers them with the rifle.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - COOK TENT - DAY

Lizzie and Wayne stand in the tent opening, she covering
the quarantine hostages inside, he covering Gena and
Darius outside.

LIZZIE

Let's wait for the chopper and let
the company handle it.

WAYNE

The company'll just make excuses
and bow to Darius' bullshit spin.

LIZZIE

But it's not our problem!

He embraces her fiercely.

WAYNE

If anybody's gonna try anything
stupid it'll be these two.

(MORE)

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Keep the shotty on the others and they'll stay in line. If any of 'em start, you know, kill 'em .

LIZZIE

Just come back. And no hero shit.

EXT. FOREST TRAIL - DAY

Darius and Gena march up the trail lugging the backpacks. Wayne follows with his rifle at the ready.

Gena stumbles and goes down on a knee. Darius reaches out to help her up.

DARIUS

Alright?

She tries to shrug him off.

GENA

Stay away.

He grips her arm even harder.

DARIUS

(sotto)
I'm on your side.

GENA

Prove it.

DARIUS

When I do, be ready.

Wayne reaches them, puts his boot to Darius' shoulder, pushes.

WAYNE

Less plotting, more walking.

INT. COOK TENT - DAY

Lizzie holds the shotgun in the crook of her arm before the assembled hostages.

Rinji stands beside her, eyeing the outside and beyond.

RINJI

C'mon, let me grab my stash. Help put a little mellow in this fellow.

LIZZIE

Addiction is a terrible thing.

CLAIRE

A stoned hostage is a peaceful
hostage.

LIZZIE

You're not hostages.

CLAIRE

We want to leave and you point a
shotgun at us. What's your take
on this, Rinji?

Rinji shuffles his feet, fumbles with the shotgun.

RINJI

I'm trying to do the right --

Lizzie expertly snatches the shotgun from his grasp.

RINJI (CONT'D)

Hey!

Two shotguns in her hands, she swings one on Rinji one on
the others.

LIZZIE

Okay. You're hostages. Now sit the
fuck down.

RINJI

The longer we hang around the more
likely we'll get infected.

LIZZIE

Wayne's also right. This storm's
looking to blow over tonight then
they'll send a crew to get us out.

CLAIRE

That could be too late.

Rinji shuffles over to a table and sits.

RINJI

Aw, fuck man.

LIZZIE

We're gonna sit tight so get used
to it.

Julian, Sal and Rose alone at the rear of the tent...

JULIAN

(sotto)

You gotta tell me what happened.

She's uneasy, shifts about, can't meet his eyes.

JULIAN (CONT'D)

We're gonna be OK, but we gotta
make a break for it.

Rose, lying on a table across the aisle, reaches out.

ROSE

Take me.

The CLICK-CLACK of a shotgun being pumped.

Lizzie holds the shotgun at her shoulder.

LIZZIE

I ain't in the mood for secrets.

Rose looks at Sal. Sal looks to Lizzie.

SAL

We'd like some tea if that's OK.

EXT. THE TREE - DUSK

Gena and Darius drop their packs at the base of the Tree.

Wayne inspects the hole Darius excavated.

WAYNE

Start packing it.

GENA

You blow this tree you'll blow a trillion spores into a thermal updraft and into the atmosphere.

WAYNE

No, I'll be incinerating them at 2800 degrees.

(turns to Darius)

Plus, you got a lab full of cordyceps to toy with back at your playpen, right.

GENA

Wayne, listen, we've failed all synthesizing attempts. We're running out of stock and this is our only source.

Wayne suddenly gives Darius a chop to the ribs with his rifle butt, then a blow to the chest drops him into the hole.

WAYNE

(looking down at Darius)

Good to know I've got all bases covered, Gena.

Wayne turns to see Gena running for it. He BLASTS the ground at her feet stopping her in her tracks.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

That's fair warning number one.

(beat)

Now get back here so we can blow
this bitch and go home.

INT. COOK TENT - DUSK

Claire hovers over the stove watching the kettle begin to
boil. Lizzie's watchful eye is on her.

Claire fills a glass of water from the tank and drinks it
shakily.

LIZZIE

You can chuck that glass when
you're done.

She attempts to stare Lizzie down, then turns to Rose.

CLAIRE

Think you can drink some tea?

...just as she lunges out through the rear tent flap.

LIZZIE

Hey!

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - CONTINUOUS

Rose lurches towards the edge of the clearing.

Rinji runs after her as Lizzie charges out and fires a
SHOT in the air.

Rinji instinctively ducks, turns back.

RINJI

Take it easy, I'll stop her.

ANGLE ON

Julian and Sal make a break for it as well.

Claire sees them. Hesitates.

Lizzie draws a bead on Sal's retreating back but Claire
knocks the shotgun up just as she FIRES.

Lizzie spins fast and clocks her with the butt sending
her down. Turns the shotgun to Sal again.

CLAIRE

Let them go.

Lizzie can't pull the trigger on them.

LIZZIE

Fuck!

Instead she turns the shotty to Claire.

CLAIRE

If she's got it she'll be dead
before dawn.

LIZZIE

And she'll be takin' her man with
her too. This is so fucked.

Lizzie turns and makes off after Rose and Rinji as Julian
and Sal disappear into the woods in the other direction.

EXT. FOREST - DUSK

At the edge of a steep slope Rinji grabs hold of Rose and
tries to restrain her.

RINJI

Rose, wait. You're gonna get
yourself killed.

She relaxes a little.

ROSE

S'okay...s'okay...just need to
breathe.

RINJI

Alright. I'm here. We're gonna go
back in a second, okay?

ROSE

Okay.

Caught off-guard, Rinji is given a powerful shove sending
him into the mud.

Rose stares up wildly, looking for high ground.

LIZZIE (O.C.)

Don't fuckin' move!

Rose turns slightly then begins to scramble away.

Lizzie blasts a shot over her head.

Rose jumps at the closest tree and begins to scale it
fast, clawing upwards with power.

RINJI

Holy shit!

Lizzie raises the shotgun and sights on Rose.

LIZZIE

We're all gonna remember this as a
mercy killing if it comes down to
law and order bullshit, right?

Rinji hesitates then leaps for her but it's too late as
Lizzie lets off a SHOT.

Rose is peppered through the torso with shot and the
branch she's holding is shredded.

She falls 10 meters, slams into the ground, bounces over
the edge of the slope and rolls violently down, bashing
boulders before coming to a bloody halt.

Rinji turns to confront Lizzie but Claire runs up in time
to put a firm hand on his chest.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)

It was the right thing to do,
considering.

They all look down the slope.

Miraculously, Rose raises her bloodied head and attempts
to stand. A BROKEN FEMUR juts from her leg.

Rose wavers on her feet and starts to walk uphill on the
grinding bone. She SHRIEKS in agony, carries on, her
energy building, her destroyed leg flailing at her side.

Rinji jumps over the ledge and skids down towards her.

CLAIRE

Rinji, don't!

But he's already at her side. He takes her in his arms
and struggles up with her.

EXT. THE TREE - DUSK

Gena loads white phosphorous grenades down to Darius who
stands in the darkness of the hole.

Wayne keeps kicking more cans toward her.

DARIUS (O.C.)

How am I supposed to see what I'm
doing down here?

WAYNE

You want I should light you a
torch?

Darius sneers knowingly amidst the mycelium-slick walls
and tangled roots.

DARIUS

Why don't you come down and give a hand?

GENA

(to Wayne)

You planning on incinerating him too?

WAYNE

I'm not a murderer.

GENA

Funny, I get the feeling you've killed people.

WAYNE

There's a difference.

GENA

I'm just trying to protect the last thing that could cure this.

WAYNE

So you want to save the world, huh? How's that worked out so far?

Gena shakes her head, takes a step back and jumps into the hole.

Wayne peers in.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Far as I know we're all infected. So if you really want to save the world, help me do something about it while we still can.

EXT. BENEATH THE TREE - SAME

Darius is backed up, sitting amongst the roots, mycelium spreads out about his feet, his head. He seems to be reclining in it. The Mycelium King on his throne.

With her eyes on Darius, Gena shouts up to Wayne.

GENA

I can't let you destroy the Tree.

WAYNE (O.S.)

What about you Darius? Down with the ship?

DARIUS

I wouldn't be much of a man if I just let you burn her, would I?

EXT. THE TREE - SAME

Wayne pulls a flare from his belt and ignites it. It burns with a bright blue flame.

EXT. FOREST - DUSK

Claire and Lizzie retreat as Rinji nears the top of the slope with Rose.

She thrashes weakly against him.

Rinji looks to Claire, desperate.

CLAIRE

What are you doing? It's got her, man. What the fuck are you doing?

RINJI

The HAZMAT guys will be here and they...she's gonna be okay.

CLAIRE

Bullshit. It's got her. She's dead, man. And it's gonna get you.

RINJI

Somebody had to help her.

Lizzie backs up a few more steps towards camp.

RINJI (CONT'D)

I had to help her.

Rinji sees clearly it has taken her. Several nodes pulse over her forehead, across her face.

ROSE

Stay away.
(beat)
It's eating me.

Claire CRIES in panic and backs away.

Rinji, realizing its over, lays her on the earth.

CLAIRE

Help will be here soon.

A shudder rolls through Rose's body and she starts crawling away.

LIZZIE

Get out of the way!

Rose drags her broken body over the earth.

ROSE

Please. Help me up...

She starts to circle, searching for the closest tree.

She's not going to make it so she struggles to a sitting position and looks at them.

ROSE (CONT'D)

Sorry. Didn't mean...

Then she croaks a GUTTURAL CRY as her body starts to cleave open from the skull.

RINJI

Shoot her! Shoot her! Don't let her suffer!

CLAIRE

Kill her!

Rinji WAILS in horror as Rose's body convulses and TENDRILS start to shoot from her head.

The awful tearing and thrashing finally propels Lizzie to BLAST SHELLS into Rose but to no avail.

Rinji spies the SWEAT pouring off Lizzie's forehead. Then a PULSE at her temple. A lesion bursts open, leaking a trail of pus and blood.

Rinji reaches down just as she starts to turn to him.

LIZZIE

Nobody else needs to get hurt.

Rinji clubs her with a branch and she goes down dazed.

Rinji flees with Claire stumbling after him.

Lizzie rises up on one elbow and watches them scramble away. She reloads the shotgun and follows, Rose's corpus thrashing violently behind her.

EXT. FOREST - DUSK

Julian leads Sal along a forest path.

JULIAN

Larkin Cove has a water taxi. We keep on down the valley. We're gonna make it.

She's exhausted. He pulls at her arm, bringing her close.

JULIAN (CONT'D)

When we get back to town we'll...

Sal's not listening. Her legs give way and she sits down.

He tries to pull her up.

SAL

I'm just gonna rest here a while.

She starts to shudder then CRIES OUT holding her head.

Julian takes her up in his arms and runs.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - DUSK

Dr. Maynard stands at the base of a metal ladder that towers into the darkening sky.

Lesions split and ooze across his forehead.

He looks up to a halo of light at the towers peak.

He watches his hand grip the first rung of the ladder.

DR. MAYNARD

No...

Then the other hand grabs the rung above and he launches himself, scrambling up and into the dusk.

EXT. BENEATH/ABOVE THE TREE - DUSK

In the near dark Gena stands across from Darius who leans into the mycelium.

WAYNE (O.C.)

Last chance. I toss this in they won't even find your fuckin' fillings.

GENA

You can't do this Wayne.

Wayne stands above the hole a beat then lets the flare fall in the dirt at this feet and squashes it.

WAYNE

Fuck.

(beat)

Don't do anything stupid.

Mycelium rises up Gena's ankles. She tries to kick free, reaches for the earth above.

GENA

You're a carrier. That's why you're playing both sides... 'cause it doesn't matter.

Darius just smiles.

Gena pulls partially free from the encroaching mycelium and attempts to scale the slimy walls.

GENA (CONT'D)

Wayne, help me outta here!

DARIUS

You can't fight it. They choose those who are closest. Those who understand.

Gena's hand rips through the earth as Wayne's hand reaches down, just missing her grasp and she's wrenched down by Darius.

He throws her on her back, forcing her beneath the slime.

DARIUS (CONT'D)

And if anyone understands them, it's you.

GENA

Don't...Darius...

WAYNE (O.C.)

Gena?

Darius holds her, watching intently as mycelium spreads over her, up her legs, about her arms, pinning her down.

DARIUS

It's what you wanted. To give nature the time to heal itself.

Then -- a SHOT rings out and Darius' head explodes in a RED MIST and he's thrown forward off Gena.

She tries to rise but is smothered in mycelium, GASPING.

Wayne leaps in, tears her free and lifts her upwards.

GENA

It's in me. Feel it...inside me!

WAYNE

Climb!

She scrambles to the surface then gives her hand to Wayne to help him out.

Wayne climbs out and they scurry away from the hole, collapsing a few meters away.

Wayne sees her drenched in mycelium and starts to crawl away.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

You and I, we're gonna burn it down, right?

EXT. CLIFF - DUSK

Julian breaks through the bush with Sal and slides to a halt at the edge of a cliff.

A tree at the edge towers over the gorge below.

Sal struggles against him, her head craning towards the tree. He strokes her hair just as she SHUDDERS violently.

The back of her head CRACKS open and mycelium leaks out.

Julian looks at his mycelium-slick hand then strokes her cheek with the other.

JULIAN

It's okay baby, its okay...

She wrenches away, lunges for the tree and begins to clamber up - but Julian grabs her foot and hangs on.

He's losing his grip, hanging over the precipice. He looks down into the darkness then back up.

Sal stares at him dully as SNAKY TENDRILS emerge from her in a medusa-like writhing.

She shakes him off with an indifferent kick, sending him careening into the darkness below.

She watches a moment then scrambles upwards.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - DUSK

Lizzie staggers into what appears to be a deserted camp. She holds the rifle ready, covering all angles.

LIZZIE

Rinji? Claire?

Claire and Rinji hide behind a container.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)

Come on out you two.

She turns in a circle.

LIZZIE (CONT'D)

Nobody's gonna shoot you.

(beat)

Promise.

EXT. THE TREE - DUSK

Gena is on her knees, hands on her chest. Wayne stands several meters away watching her every move.

WAYNE

You can feel it?

She looks down.

GENA

Yeah.

(beat)

It doesn't hurt.

WAYNE

That don't make sense. Your friend
Tor? It sure seemed to hurt him.

She looks up at him. Eyes clear. Focused.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

Now you just stay put, keep your
distance and don't go all fuckin'
weird on me.

(takes walkie-talkie)

I'm gonna raise Lizzie, hear when
the whirly-bird's gonna swing by
with that Hazmat team, take care
of you.

GENA

Wayne?

WAYNE

Yeah?

GENA

It's inside me but it's not gonna
kill me.

WAYNE

(understanding)

Like a carrier. A host.

GENA

Darius knew it. That's why he was
so confident. The cordyceps - I
know how this sounds - but he
believes they let him know he was
a carrier.

WAYNE

The cordyceps? The fungus talked
to him?

GENA

It sounds crazy, but hard science
has proven they influence their
hosts behavior, driving them to
seek new territory where they can
thrive and multiply once their
host...

She falters, looking inwards...

WAYNE

What about their host?

GENA

Once their host serves its purpose
and meets its demise.

Wayne measures her over as she realizes what she's said.

WAYNE

So should I kill you now or what?
'Cause if you're right your sole
purpose now is to mass-infect all
you come in contact with and take
over the world.

(beat)

Right?

She raised her head, meets his gaze head-on.

GENA

Right.

Just as...

Darius explodes out of the hole and rises up.

The GAPING WOUND from the bullet that exploded his head
gleams white with fresh, healing mycelium.

WAYNE

Fuckin' Christ!

Wayne goes for Gena's pistol in his belt but Darius kicks
his knee out flooring him, snatches the pistol and casts
it into the hole.

Wayne whips out his Kabar fighting knife as Darius weighs
the scene before him.

WAYNE (CONT'D)

(to Gena)

Get back!

Darius, his head blown to bits but on the mend, steps
towards Gena.

DARIUS

You're just like me.

(ghastly smile)

Always wanted to be just like me.

Wayne lunges, slashing Darius across the chest. Darius
HOWLS and throws a mighty blow to his head.

Wayne twists about and slashes him across the hand,
fingers fly. Darius teeters back. Wayne scrambles over
and pushes hard into Darius crushing him to the earth.

Wayne fights with brutal skill, but Darius continues to strike back unharmed and a fear builds in Wayne's eyes.

Gena approaches unsteadily in the background.

GENA

Darius!

Wayne turns a split second...and Darius pops out Wayne's eye with his thumb. Wayne SHRIEKS and collapses.

Darius stands triumphant over Wayne's writhing body.

GENA (CONT'D)

Don't kill him!

Darius looks up, the fissure in his head throbs and glistens.

DARIUS

But of course not.

He picks Wayne up by the scruff of his shirt and embraces him in a fungal kiss of death. Mycelium flows into Wayne, flooding over his lips, choking him into unconsciousness.

Darius drops him unceremoniously, turns to Gena.

DARIUS (CONT'D)

We've all got a new purpose now.

INT. RESEARCH CAMP - CONTAINER - DUSK

Lizzie's hunched over the shortwave radio.

LIZZIE

Override any evac options. Repeat, stay the fuck out of here.

DISPATCHER (O.S.)

HAZMAT is on its way Lizzie. You got a new situation?

LIZZIE

Scrub the site. Anyone comes in here is gonna die. We got serious plague happening.

DISPATCHER (O.S.)

What the hell you going on about?

Lizzie reloads the shotgun, grabs her throbbing head.

LIZZIE

We've all got to die. They can't let it out of here.

The floor creaks. She turns and --

Rinji THUNKS her in the face with a fire extinguisher.

She slumps over the table, her face split open.

DISPATCHER (O.S.)

Lizzie?

Then she turns her head...

CLAIRE

Oh, fuck.

...and stands up.

Claire swings a shovel blade sending her reeling into the wall in a bloody mess.

And then the crack in her head spills over with mycelium and she CONVULSES violently.

Claire steps in coolly and stabs with her shovel until the convulsions stop.

She turns back to Rinji, clenched teeth, hands shaking. She drops the shovel, SOBS overtaking her.

Rinji leads her outside as a CHOPPER approaches.

RINJI

They're here! They've come for us!

EXT. THE TREE - DUSK

Dying, Wayne claws into his pocket for a flare and begins to crawl towards the hole while trying to ignite it.

Before he can drop it into the hole, Darius makes a staggering leap on top of him and kicks the flare away.

WAYNE

Gena...could use your help over here!

Darius drags Wayne to the hole and rolls him in.

Turns to Gena.

DARIUS

It's going to be beautiful.

Gena turns and runs into the forest as the WHOOP-WHOOP of helicopter blades begin.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - SAME

Rinji and Claire look up as a WESTFOR HELICOPTER appears over the horizon and lands in a dusty swirl.

A red-suited and masked THREE-MAN HAZMAT CREW jump out with gear in hand.

HAZMAT LEADER

Stay where you are!

He approaches slowly, stops several meters from them then tosses a canvas bag at their feet.

HAZMAT LEADER (CONT'D)

Suits. Filtration masks. Put them on. They're gonna scrub the site.

CLAIRE

What?

HAZMAT LEADER

Move it!

They look at each other.

RINJI

It doesn't have me.

CLAIRE

(feeling her chest)
Me neither.

Rinji smiles weakly then they hurriedly put the suits on.

EXT. RESEARCH CAMP - AERIAL - DUSK

The helicopter lifts off and heads toward the Tree.

EXT. BENEATH THE TREE - DUSK

The mycelium wells up over Wayne. He struggles upwards pulling it off himself.

Darius leaps down on top of him and delivers a crushing blow then holds him under.

DARIUS

It's for the best. You'll see.

The fungus rushes into Wayne's mouth and nose smothering him. His chest heaves once, twice, then its over.

Darius takes a last interested look then turns to the hole above.

EXT. THE TREE - SAME

Darius, his head melded together by mycelium, clambers out of the hole.

Gena holds Wayne's shotgun couched in her arm pointed at his head and a lit flare in the other hand.

DARIUS

It chose you Gena.

GENA

Stop!

DARIUS

It chose us.

His crazed eyes look over her longingly.

DARIUS (CONT'D)

Living in unison with a perfect organism? It's beautiful.

She seems to give in, lowers the rifle a notch. He takes a step closer.

DARIUS (CONT'D)

The world will become a garden again.

GENA

Maybe...

Then...

She throws the burning flare at him and FIRES the rifle into his chest.

Darius teeters back. She fires into his guts toppling him into the hole.

She turns and runs. Fast.

The ground rumbles then a brilliant WHITE FLARE EXPLODES out of the hole followed by a vast column of smoke.

Gena is thrown by the force. She rolls over to see super-heated flames surge up the Tree.

She scrambles back as the flames bear down on her.

Then the Tree begins to waver...

INT. HELICOPTER - FLYING - DUSK

The Pilot points at the Tree as it shudders and smokes.

Claire presses her face to the window and sees...

ANGLE ON

Gena staggering into the wasteland, collapses, the flames encroaching.

CLAIRE

Gena! She's down there!

The Hazmat Medic signals to the Pilot to go down.

The phosphorous burns the Tree to the ground as a writhing column of smoke curls into the sky.

EXT. FIRESTORMED FOREST - DUSK

The helicopter passes, circles, then lands beside Gena.

The HAZMAT crew jump out and turn her over. She's unconscious, face and hands covered in burns.

HAZMAT MEDIC

Quick. Let's get her covered.

They get a suit on her and as they try to pull a mask over her face she reacts, shaking her head wildly.

GENA

No!

They subdue her and lift her into the helicopter.

The door slides shut and they whirl up into the maelstrom of fire, sparks, ash and smoke.

INT. HELICOPTER - FLYING - SAME

The Hazmat Medic tries to get the mask on Gena as the Hazmat Leader holds her down.

The Hazmat Medic recoils at the mycelium healing over the wounds.

HAZMAT MEDIC

What the hell is that?

Rinji and Claire react with horror and scramble away.

RINJI

Get her out! Throw her out!

HAZMAT LEADER

What?

CLAIRE

Do it!

RINJI

She'll kill us all! Do it!

Rinji grabs Gena's heels to drag her out but the Hazmat Medic swats him away.

Rinji hurls at him, slamming him against the door and knocking him out.

Rinji grapples with the door to slide it open. A WARNING ALARM sounds.

The HAZMAT LEADER tries to wrestle Rinji away but its open.

Claire jumps in and they wrestle him out the door and watch him spiralling away below.

The PILOT looks over his shoulder.

PILOT

What have you done?

CLAIRE

Just fly or we're all dead!

Claire staggers back aghast, keeping Gena in her sights.

They circle Gena who's raised herself up on elbows.

Claire takes the stretcher grips at Gena's feet and starts to push her towards the door.

Gena grips a tie-down then reaches up and grabs a handful of Claire's hair pulling her in close.

Rinji charges...

RINJI

No!

Gena slips her grip on the tie-down and Claire and swats powerfully at Rinji and he falls, skitters across the banking floor clawing for a grip in the swaying copter.

His legs dangle out, slipping just as --

Claire grasps at his outstretched hand last second.

Gena raises herself up on wobbly legs. She spots --

The Pilot going for the pistol in his belt but before he can fire Gena leaps in and grabs the control stick.

The Pilot wrestles for control as the chopper lurches but it strikes a rock outcropping and goes into a wild spin.

Claire holds on in the cargo bay, Rinji swaying at the edge, losing him.

Gena turns to Claire. Not the Gena she once knew. She's horribly burned but the mycelium is already healing her.

GENA

I'm sorry.

The WHINING ROTORS increase, the copter spins dizzily downwards, downwards...

BLACKOUT

EXT. CRASH SITE - DUSK

The helicopter, buried in the ash and earth, nose in.

The fuselage ripped open, flames sputtering. The blades spin slowly, angled into the earth and kicking up ash.

Gena slithers out of the fuselage and over the crushed body of Rinji.

She drags herself over the scarred earth, a steely determination etched into her beautifully battered face.

She crawls up to a dead-eyed Claire, her head caved in.

Gena crawls further, hand over hand. An EXPLOSION as the copter goes up showering her in shrapnel and sparks.

Then she starts digging into the earth with her bloodied, mycelium-webbed fingers.

She forces herself deeper and deeper into the ground, until she's consumed by the darkness.

EXT. UNDER THE EARTH

Gena, curled into a fetal ball underground, the whites of her eyes and the luminous mycelium crawling over her.

The DRONE of planes nearing. CONCUSSIONS shake the earth.

FLASHES OF LIGHT blast into the earth, illuminating Gena, her alive staring eyes flutter then close.

BLACKOUT.

EXT. UNIVERSITY - NIGHT

Deathly quiet. Dr. Maynard crouches at the very top of the floodlight tower, his hands gripped on a metal support bar.

His head juts to the night sky, neck strained, all rippled with lesions.

From silence a CROWD begins to ROAR below.

And as it does his head splits open and a steely tendril rises into the night.

The CROWD ROARS are louder now, cheering.

The tendril reaches its maximum height and sways in the night breeze.

Dr. Maynard's face now a twisted smear of pain. He splits his mouth in a silent SCREAM as smaller multicolored tendrils pierce from his face and neck.

A BULB engorges at the end of the large tendril, pulses once then EXPLODES in a silent cloud of spores that spiral into the night.

A small swath ascends upwards into the breeze while the greater of them descend as innocent as dandelion spores downwards...

...and into the STADIUM where 70.000 football fans CHEER the battling teams.

EXT. UNDER THE EARTH

Near-dark shadows. Shifting movement. A GASP for breathe.

Then, the WHITES of someone's eyes as they pop open.

GENA (V.O.)
A garden again...beautiful.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END

*